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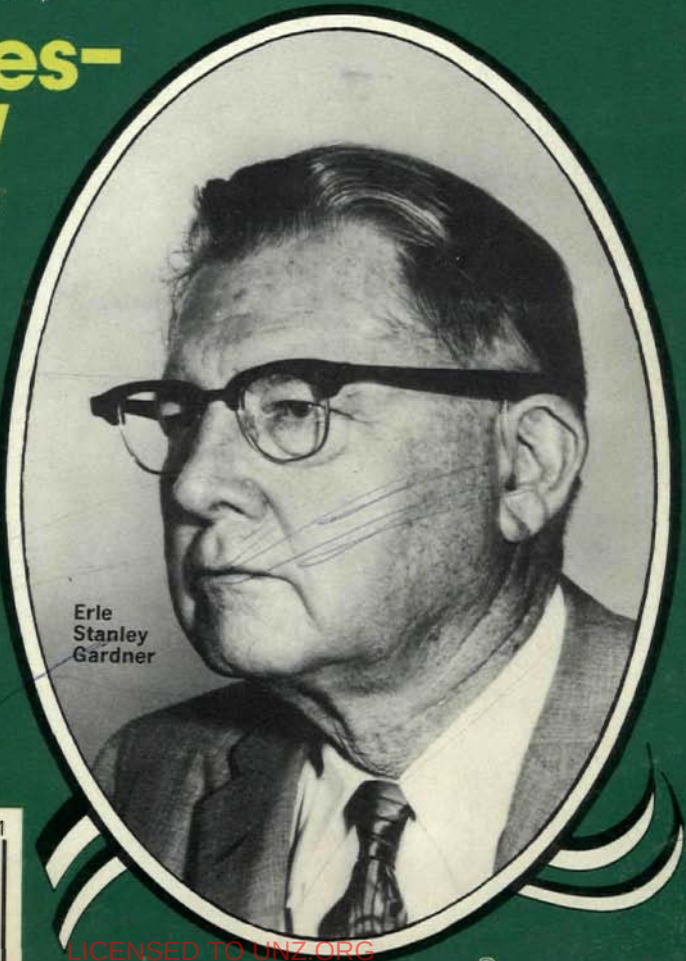

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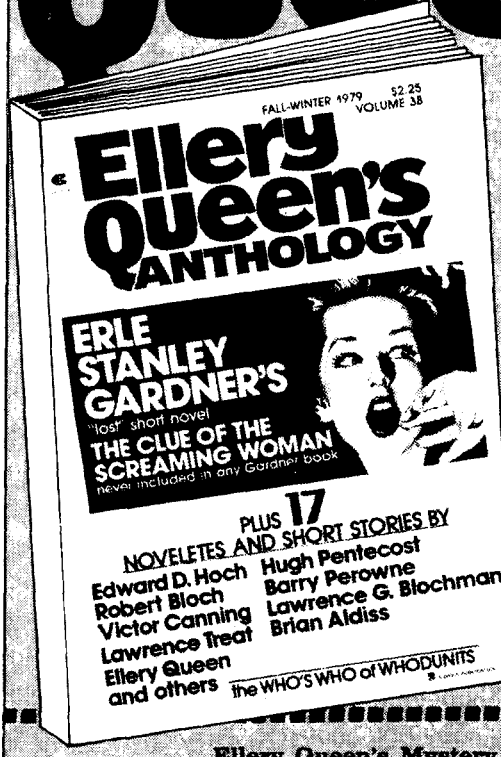

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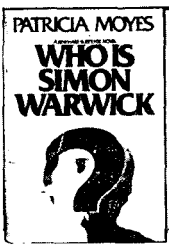

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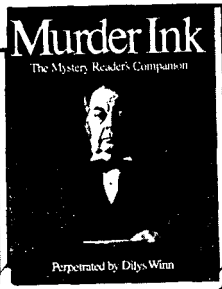

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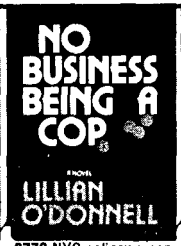

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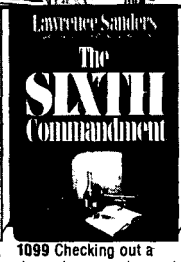

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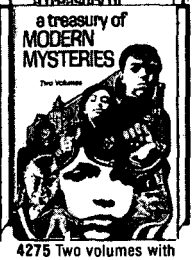

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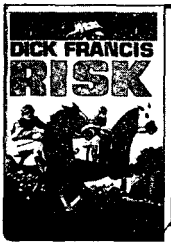

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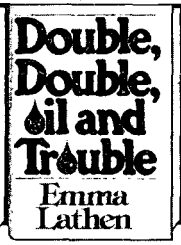

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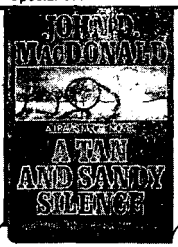

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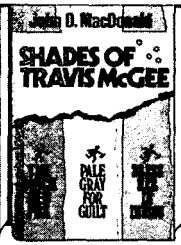

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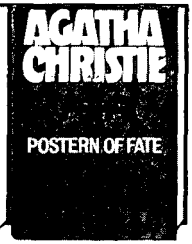

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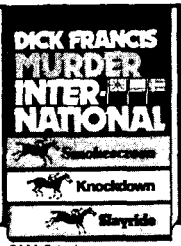

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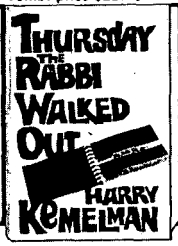

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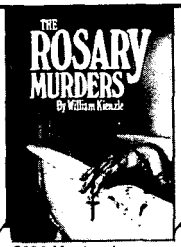

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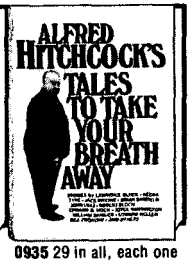

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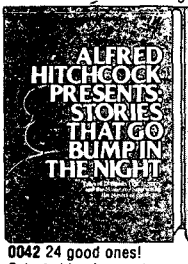

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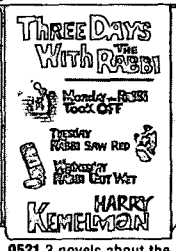

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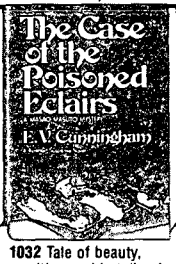

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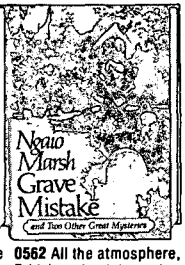

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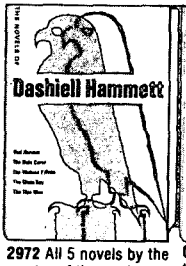

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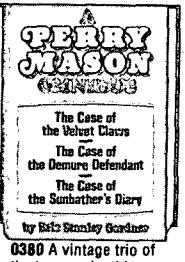
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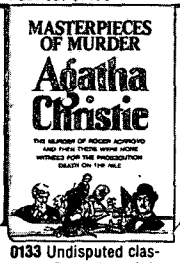

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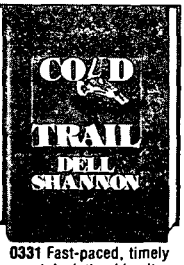

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THE BOILER

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Harold Boyle was on his way out to lunch when the encounter took place that changed his life. He was bound for a vegetarian restaurant deliberately chosen because to reach it he had to walk across the park. A walk during the day did you good, just as eating a nut, raisin, and cheese salad was better for you than consuming chunks of meat that lay like lead in the stomach. He always returned feeling positively healthier, ready and even eager for the columns of figures that awaited him.

On this day he was walking along by the pond, stepping it out to reach the restaurant, when a man coming toward him said, "Hallo." Harold gave a half smile, half grimace, intended as acknowledgement while suggesting that in fact they didn't know each other. The man stopped. He was a fleshy fellow, with a large aggressive face. When he smiled, as he did now, he revealed a mouthful of beautiful white teeth. His appearance struck some disagreeable chord in Harold's memory. Then the man spoke, and the past came back.

"If it isn't the boiler," the man said. "Jack Cutler, remember me?"

Harold's smallish white hand was gripped in a large red one.

From that moment onward things seemed to happen of their own volition. He was carried along on the tide of Cutler's boundless energy. The feeble suggestion that he already had a lunch engagement was swept aside, they were in a taxi and then at Cutler's club,

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and he was having a drink at the bar although he never took liquor at lunchtime.

Then lunch, and it turned out that Cutler had ordered already, great steaks that must have cost a fortune, and a bottle of wine. During the meal Cutler talked about the firm of building contractors he ran and of its success, the way business was waiting for you if you had the nerve to go out and get it. While he talked, the large teeth bit into the steak as though they were shears. Then his plate was empty.

"Talking about myself too much, always do when I eat. Can't tell you how good it is to see you, my old boiler. What are you doing with yourself?"

"I am a contract estimator for a firm of paint manufacturers."

"Work out price details, keep an eye open to make sure nobody's cheating? Everybody cheats nowadays, you know that. I reckon some of my boys are robbing me blind, fiddling estimates, taking a cut themselves. You reckon something can be done about that sort of thing?"

"If the estimates are properly checked in advance, certainly."

Cutler chewed a toothpick. "What do they pay you at the paint shop?"

It was at this point, he knew afterward, that he should have said no, he was not interested, he would be late back at the office. Perhaps he should even have been bold enough to tell the truth, and say that he did not want to see Cutler again. Instead he meekly gave the figure.

"Skinflints, aren't they? Come and work for me and I'll double it."

Again he knew he should have said no, I don't want to work for you. Instead, he murmured something about thinking it over.

"That's my good old careful boiler," Cutler said, and laughed.

"I must get back to the office. Thank you for lunch."

"You'll be in touch?"

Harold said yes, intending to write a note turning down the offer. When he got home, however, he was foolish enough to mention the offer to his wife, in response to a question about what kind of day he had had. He could have bitten out his tongue the moment after. Of course she immediately said that he must take it.

"But Phyl, I can't. I don't like Cutler."

"He seems to like you, taking you to lunch and making this offer. Where did you know him?"

"We were at school together. He likes power over people, that's

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all he thinks of. He was an awful bully. When we were at school he called me a boiler."

"A *what*? Oh, I see, a joke on your name. I don't see there's much harm in that."

"It wasn't a joke. It was to show his–his contempt. He made other people be contemptuous too. And he still says it–when we met he said it's the boiler."

"It sounds a bit childish to me. You're not a child now, Harold."

"You don't understand," he cried out in despair. "You just don't understand."

"I'll tell you what I do understand," she said. Her small pretty face was distorted with anger. "We've been married eight years, and you've been in the same firm all the time. Same firm, same job, no promotion. Now you're offered double the money. Do you know what that would mean? I could get some new clothes, we could have a washing machine, we might even be able to move out of this neighbourhood to somewhere really nice. And you just say no to it, like that. If you want me to stay you'd better change your mind."

She went out, slamming the door. When he went upstairs later he found the bedroom door locked. He slept in the spare room.

Or at least he lay in bed there. He thought about Cutler, who had been a senior when he was a junior. Cutler was the leader of a group who called themselves The Razors, and one day Harold found himself surrounded by them while on his way home. They pushed and pulled him along to the house of one boy whose parents were away. In the garden shed there they held a kind of trial in which they accused him of having squealed on a gang member who had asked Harold for the answers to some exam questions. Harold had given the answers, some of them had been wrong, and the master had spotted these identical wrong answers. Under questioning, Harold told the master what had happened.

He tried to explain that this was not squealing, but the gang remained unimpressed. Suggestions about what should be done to him varied from cutting off all his hair to holding him face down in a lavatory bowl. Somebody said that Boyle should be put in a big saucepan and boiled, which raised a laugh. Then Cutler intervened. He was big even then, a big red-faced boy, very sarcastic.

"We don't want to *do* anything. He'll only go sniveling back to teacher. Let's call him something. Call him the boiler."

Silence. Somebody said, "Don't see he'll mind."

"Oh, yes, he will." Cutler came close to Harold, his big face sneer-

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ing. "Because I'll tell him what it means, and then he'll remember every time he hears it. Now, you just repeat this after me, boiler." Then Cutler recited the ritual of the boiler and Harold, after his hair had been pulled and his arm twisted until he thought it would break, repeated it.

He remembered the ritual. It began: *I am a boiler. A boiler is a mean little sneak. He can't tie his own shoelaces. A boiler fails in everything he tries. A boiler stinks. I am a boiler.*

Then they let him go, and he ran home. But that was the beginning of it, not the end. Cutler and his gang never called him anything else. They clamped their fingers to their noses when he drew near and said, "Watch out, here's the boiler, pooh, what a stink."

Other boys caught on and did the same. He became a joke, an outcast. His work suffered, he got a bad end-of-term report. His father had died when he was five, so it was his beloved mother who asked him whether something was wrong. He burst into tears. She said that he must try harder next term, and he shook his head.

"It's no good, I can't. I can't do it, I'm a boiler."

"A boiler? What do you mean?"

"A boiler, it means I'm no good, can't do anything right. It's what they call me."

"Who calls you that?"

He told her. She insisted on going up to school and seeing the headmaster, although he implored her not to, and afterward of course things were worse than ever. The head had said that he would see what could be done, but that boys would be boys and Harold was perhaps oversensitive. Now the gang pretended to burst into tears whenever they saw him, and said poor little boiler should run home to mummy.

And he often did run home from school to mummy. He was not ashamed to remember that he had loved his mother more than anybody else in the world, and that his love had been returned. She was a highly emotional woman, and so nervous that she kept a tiny pearl-handled revolver beside her bed. Harold had lived with her until she died. She left him all she had, which was a little money in gilt-edged stocks, some old fashioned jewelry, and the revolver. He sold the stocks and the jewelry, and kept the revolver in a bureau which he used as a writing desk.

It was more than 20 years ago that Cutler had christened him boiler, but the memory remained painful. And now Phyllis wanted him to work with the man. Of course she couldn't know what the

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word meant, how could anybody know? He saw that in a way Phyllis was right. She had been only 22, ten years younger than Harold, when they married after his mother's death. It was true that he had expected promotion, he should have changed jobs, it would be wonderful to have more money. You mustn't be a boiler all your life, he said to himself. Cutler was being friendly when he offered him the job.

And he couldn't bear to be on bad terms with Phyl, or to think that she might leave him. There had been an awful time, four years ago, when he had discovered that she was carrying on an affair with another man, some salesman who had called at the door to sell a line of household brooms and brushes. He had come home early one day and found them together. Phyl was shamefaced but defiant, saying that if he only took her out a bit more it wouldn't have happened. Was it the fact that the salesman was a man of her own age, he asked. She shook her head, but said that it might help if Harold didn't behave like an old man of 60.

In the morning he told Phyl that he had thought it over, and changed his mind. She said that he would have been crazy not to take the job. Later that day he telephoned Cutler.

To his surprise he did not find the new job disagreeable. It was more varied than his old work, and more interesting. He checked everything carefully, as he had always done, and soon unearthed evidence showing that one of the foremen was working with a sales manager to inflate the cost of jobs by putting in false invoices billed to a non-existent firm. Both men were sacked immediately.

He saw Cutler on most days. Harold's office overlooked the entrance courtyard, so that if he looked out of the window he could see Cutler's distinctive gold-and-silver colored Rolls-Royce draw up. A smart young chauffeur opened the door and the great man stepped out, often with a cigar in his mouth, and nodded to the chauffeur who then took the car round to the parking lot. Cutler came in around ten thirty, and often invaded Harold's office after lunch, smelling of drink, his face very red. He was delighted by the discovery of the invoice fraud, and clapped Harold on the back.

"Well done, my old boiler. It was a stroke of inspiration asking you to come here. Hasn't worked out too badly for you either, has it?" Harold agreed. He talked as little as possible to his employer. One day Cutler complained of this.

"Damn it, man, anybody would think we didn't know each other. Just because I use a Rolls and have young Billy Meech drive me in

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here every morning doesn't mean I'm stand-offish. You know why I do it? The Rolls is good publicity, the best you can have, and I get driven in every morning because it saves time. I work in the car dictating letters and so forth. I drive myself most of the time though–Meech has got a cushy job and he knows it. But don't think I forget old friends. I tell you what, you and your wife must come out and have dinner one night. And we'll use the Rolls."

Harold protested, but a few days later a letter came, signed "Blanche Cutler," saying that Jack was delighted that an old friendship had been renewed, and suggesting a dinner date. Phyllis could hardly contain her pleasure, and was both astonished and furious when Harold said they shouldn't go, they would be like poor relations.

"What are you talking about? He's your old friend, isn't he? And he's been decent to you, giving you a job. If *he's* not snobby, I don't see why you should be."

"I told you I don't like him. We're not friends."

She glared at him. "You're jealous, that's all. You're a failure yourself, and you can't bear anybody else to be a success."

In the end, of course, they went.

Cutler and Harold left the office in the Rolls, driven by Meech, who was in his middle twenties, and they collected Phyllis on the way. She had bought a dress for the occasion, and Harold could see that she was taking everything in greedily–the way Meech sprang out to open the door, the luxurious interior of the Rolls, the cocktail cabinet from which Cutler poured drinks, the silent smoothness with which they traveled. Cutler paid what Harold thought were ridiculous compliments on Phyllis' dress and appearance, saying that Harold had kept his beautiful young wife a secret.

"You're a lucky man, my old boiler."

"Harold said that was what you called him. It seems a silly name."

"Just a reminder of schooldays," Cutler said easily, and Harold hated him.

The Cutlers lived in a big red-brick house in the outer suburbs, with a garden of more than an acre and a swimming pool. Blanche was a fine imposing woman, with a nose that seemed permanently raised in the air. Another couple came to dinner, the man big and loud-voiced like Cutler, his wife a small woman loaded down with what were presumably real pearls and diamonds. The man was some sort of stockbroker, and there was a good deal of conversation about the state of the market.

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Dinner was served by a maid in cap and apron, and was full of foods covered with rich sauces which Harold knew would play havoc with his digestion. There was a lot of wine, and he saw with dismay that Phyllis' glass was being refilled frequently.

"You and Jack were great friends at school, he tells me," Blanche Cutler said, nose in air. What could Harold do but agree? "He says that now you are his right-hand man. I do think it is so nice when old friendships are continued in later life."

He muttered something, and then was horrified to hear the word *boiler* spoken by Phyllis.

"What's that?" the stockbroker asked, cupping hand to ear. Phyllis giggled. She was a little drunk.

"Do you know what they used to call Harold at school? A boiler. What does it mean, Jack, you must tell us what it means."

"It was just a nickname." Cutler seemed embarrassed. "Because his name was Boyle, you see."

"I know you're hiding something from me." Phyllis tapped Cutler flirtatiously on the arm. "Was it because he looks like a tough old boiling fowl, very tasteless? Because he does. I think it's a very good name for him, a boiler."

Blanche elevated her nose a little higher and said that they would have coffee in the drawing room.

Meech drove them home in the Rolls, and gave Phyllis his arm when they got out. She clung to it, swaying a little as they moved toward the front door. Indoors, she collapsed on the sofa and said, "What a lovely lovely evening."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"I liked Jack. Your friend Jack. He's such good company. *Such* good company."

"He's not my friend, he's my employer."

"Such an attractive man, very sexy."

He remembered the salesman. "I thought you only liked younger men. Cutler's older than I am."

She looked at him with a slightly glazed eye. "Dance with me."

"We haven't got any music."

"Come *on*, doesn't matter." She pulled him to his feet and they stumbled through a few steps.

"You're drunk." He half pushed her away and she fell to the floor. She lay there staring up at him.

"You damn–you pushed me over."

"I'm sorry, Phyl. Come to bed."

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"You know what you are? You're a boiler. It's a good name for you."

"Phyl. Please."

"I married a boiler," she said, and passed out. He had to carry her up to bed.

In the morning she did not get up as usual to make his breakfast; in the evening she said sullenly that there was no point in talking any more. Harold was just a clerk and would never be anything else, didn't want to be anything else.

After lunch on the next day Cutler came into Harold's office and said he hoped they had both enjoyed the evening. For once he was not at ease, and at last came out with what seemed to be on his mind.

"I'm glad we got together again, for old times' sake. But look here, I'm afraid Phyl got hold of the wrong end of the stick. About that nickname."

"Boiler."

"Yes. Of course it was only meant affectionately. Just a play on your name." Did Cutler really believe that, could he possibly believe it? His red shining face looked earnest enough. "But people can get the wrong impression as Phyl did. Better drop it. So, no more boiler. From now on it's Jack and Harold, agreed?"

He said that he agreed. Cutler clapped him on the shoulder, and said that he was late for an appointment on the golf course. He winked as he said that you could do a lot of business between the first and the eighteenth holes. Five minutes later Harold saw him driving away at the wheel of the Rolls-Royce, a big cigar in his mouth.

In the next days Cutler was away from the office a good deal, and came into Harold's room rarely. At home Phyllis spoke to him only when she could not avoid it. At night they lay like statues side by side. He reflected that, although they had more money, it had not made them happier.

Ten days after the dinner party it happened.

Harold went that day to the vegetarian restaurant across the park. Something in his nut steak must have disagreed with him, however, because by mid-afternoon he was racked by violent stomach pains. He bore them for half an hour and then decided that he must go home.

The bus took him to the High Road, near his street. He turned the corner into it, walked a few steps, and then stopped, unbelieving.

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His house was a hundred yards down the street. And there, drawn up outside it, was Cutler's gold-and-silver Rolls.

He could not have said how long he stood there staring, as though by looking he might make the car disappear. Then he turned away, walked to the Post Office in the High Road, entered a telephone box and dialed his own number.

The telephone rang and rang. On the wooden framework of the box somebody had written "Peter loves Vi." He rubbed a finger over the words, trying to erase them.

At last Phyllis answered. She sounded breathless.

"You've been a long time."

"I was in the garden hanging out washing, didn't hear you. You sound funny. What's the matter?"

He said that he felt ill and was coming home, was leaving the office now.

She said sharply, "But you're in a call box, I distinctly heard the pips."

He explained that he had suddenly felt faint and had been near a pay telephone in the entrance hall.

"So you'll be back in half an hour." He detected relief in her voice.

During that half hour he walked about; he could not afterward have said in what streets, except that he could not bear to approach his own. He could not have borne to see Cutler driving away, a satisfied leer on his face at having once again shown the boiler who was master. Through his head there rang, over and over, Phyllis' words *such an attractive man, very sexy*, words that now seemed repeated in the sound of his own footsteps.

When he got home Phyllis exclaimed at sight of him, and said that he did look ill. She asked what he had eaten at lunch, and said that he had better lie down.

In the bedroom he caught the lingering aroma of cigar smoke, even though the window was open. He threw up in the lavatory and then said to Phyllis that he would stay in the spare room. She made no objection. During the evening she was unusually solicitous, coming up three times to ask whether there was something he would like, taking his temperature, and putting a hand on his forehead. The touch was loathsome to him.

He stayed in the spare room. In the morning he dressed and shaved, but ate no breakfast. She expressed concern.

"You look pale. If you feel ill come home, but don't forget to call first just in case I might be out."

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So, he thought, Cutler was coming again that day. The pearl-handled revolver, small as a toy, nestled in his pocket when he left. He had never fired it.

He spent the morning looking out of his window, but Cutler did not appear. He arrived soon after lunch, brought by Meech. He did not come to Harold's office.

Half an hour passed. Harold took out the revolver and balanced it in his hand. Would it fire properly, would he be able to shoot straight? He felt calm, but his hand trembled.

He took the lift up to the top floor and opened the door of Cutler's office without knocking. Cutler was talking to a recording machine, which he switched off.

"Why the hell don't you knock?" Then he said more genially, "Oh, it's you, my old–Harold. What can I do for you?"

Harold took out the little revolver. Cutler looked astonished, but not frightened. He asked what Harold thought he was doing.

Harold did not reply. Across the desk the boiler faced the man who had ruined his life. The revolver went *crack crack*. Blue smoke curled up from it. Cutler continued to stare at him in astonishment, and Harold thought that he had failed in this as he had failed in so many things, that even from a few feet he had missed. Then he saw the red spot in the middle of Cutler's forehead, and the big man collapsed face down on his desk.

Harold walked out of the room, took the lift, and left the building. He did not reply to the doorman, who asked whether he was feeling all right, he looked rather queer. He was going to give himself up to the police, but before doing so he must speak to Phyllis. He did not know just what he wanted to say, but it was necessary to show her that he was not a boiler, that Cutler had not triumphed in the end.

The bus dropped him in the High Road. He reached the corner of his street.

The gold-and-silver Rolls was there, standing in front of his house.

He walked down the street toward it, feeling the terror of a man in a nightmare. Was Cutler immortal, that he should be able to get up from the desk and drive down here? Had he imagined the red spot, had his shots gone astray? He knew only that he must find out the truth.

When he reached the car it was locked and empty. He opened his front door. The house was silent.

The house was silent and he was silent, as he moved up the stairs

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delicately on tiptoe. He opened the door of the bedroom.

Phyllis was in bed. With her was the young chauffeur Meech. A cigar, one of his master's cigars, was stubbed out in an ashtray.

Harold stared at them for a long moment of agony. Then, as they started up, he said words incomprehensible to them, words from the ritual of school. "A boiler fails in everything he tries . . . I am a boiler."

He shut the door, went into the bathroom, took out the revolver and placed the tiny muzzle in his mouth. Then he pulled the trigger.

In this final action the boiler succeeded at last.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

DEAD SHOT

by M. EDWARD HOLDEN

The old pro sighted once and shot,
  His steady aim unerring.
His foe was staggered, numb with shock,
  Aghast, beyond all caring.

"You got me, pal, I'm dead for sure,"
  Cried out the poor young fool,
As once more, for the third straight time,
  He'd lost a game of pool.

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a *NEW* detective story by

BILL PRONZINI

Another no-nonsense, straight-from-the-shoulder case about Bill Pronzini's nameless investigator, the "big inelegant-looking Italian private detective . . . the pulp-reading private eye" . . . It was a nice easy job for a handsome fee—merely guarding 200 or more gifts at a swanky wedding reception. Just a simple assignment: the gifts were in a locked room and no one could get to them. But what happened—well, it just wasn't possible any way you looked at it . . .

A NICE EASY JOB

by BILL PRONZINI

The little Marin County community of Ross, a half-hour's drive across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, was the kind of place that catered to people with a lot of money and that maintained anachronistic ideas about class and racial distinctions. They had a committee which screened applicants for pieces of their exorbitantly priced real estate. You could be as rich as King Midas, but if you did not measure up to certain rigid standards, or if you happened to be a member of a variety of ethnic groups, you would be hard-pressed to buy your way in.

Not that everybody who lived in Ross was a bigot or a snob, of course; most of the people were all right and had gravitated there for the prestige, the scenery, and the best police protection in the county. But the ones who controlled Ross were of a type. And the types they wanted to live with were their own.

As I drove through its quiet, tree-shaded streets–it was a few minutes past noon on a balmy Saturday in October–I wondered if Clyde Mollenhauer was one of those controlling forces. I did not know much about him, other than the fact that his daughter was

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to be married this afternoon at three o'clock, with the reception party to be held on his estate. I had never laid eyes on him, or even spoken to him; his secretary, a man named George Hickox, had hired me by phone.

It sounded like a nice easy job, one that paid handsome wages for not much effort, and I was glad to get it. Guard duty was what it was–not of a person but of wedding gifts. The gifts were being delivered to the estate by their respective givers prior to the church ceremony, and Hickox had told me there would be a number of "very expensive" items among them; I was supposed to keep an eye on the presents while everyone was away at the church and while they were partying afterward, in case any unsavory types got wind of the booty and decided to rip it off. That was unlikely, but a man who owned an estate in Ross could well afford to take any precaution he felt like taking.

And it was some impressive estate, too, as I discovered a few minutes later–even by Ross standards. High stone walls surrounded it, topped with iron spikes and pieces of broken colored glass imbedded in a layer of concrete. A pair of huge wrought-iron gates were closed across the entrance drive; inside them was an old-fashioned gatehouse and an old-fashioned gatekeeper to go with it. Beyond, the drive curled up through an acre of bright green lawn dotted with black oaks, to where an imposing Tudor-style house sat on higher ground.

The gatekeeper took my name, used a telephone in the gatehouse, and came back finally and swung the gates open for me. I drove inside. Off to the north I saw, as I neared the main house, a second building of the type that used to be called a carriage house. It was being painted and there was a network of metal scaffolding, ropes, pulleys, and suction clamps along the near side wall; that wall was a fading cream color, but the front was a bright gleaming white–that much of the job had been finished in time for the wedding. The scaffolding looked as out of place in these surroundings as I felt.

In front of the main house the drive blended into a circular parking area with a fountain in the center of it. I put my car between a Mercedes and a Bentley–nice company–and took the .38 revolver and its belt holster out of the glove compartment. I almost never carry a gun and don't even own one; the .38 was borrowed. But my instructions were to come armed, and for the kind of fee Mollenhauer was paying me I was willing to make a concession.

When I had the thing fitted on under my suit coat I caught up

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the small portfolio case from the seat beside me and stepped out. There was nothing in the portfolio except three pulp magazines. Collecting pulps is my hobby–I have more than 6000 detective and mystery issues in my San Francisco flat–and reading them is my pleasure. I thought it would be all right if I spent my guard duty reading while watching over the wedding gifts instead of just sitting like a lump and merely watching.

A uniformed maid answered the door chimes and admitted me. The interior of the house was opulent, but furnished with taste and care, all in antiques; I admired them in passing as she ushered me through a couple of rooms and down a wide hallway. Halfway along was an open set of double mahogany doors. We went through them into a study lined with books and furnished with masculine-type antiques.

There were three men in the room, all of them wearing tuxedos. When the maid announced me, the oldest of the men detached himself from the other two and came over to introduce himself. Clyde Mollenhauer. He was in his late forties or early fifties, tall and trim, with an air of forcefulness about him. He had straight black hair, penetrating eyes the color of burnt umber, and a Hapsburg jaw that made his lower teeth prominent when he opened his mouth.

If he was a bigot or a snob, you could not tell it from outward appearances; he seemed courteous enough and there was no trace of condescension in his voice. But I was aware that he had not offered to shake hands with me.

He led me over to the other two. The rather brawny, heavy-featured, thirtyish man on the left was George Hickox, the secretary. I asked him how he was, and he said he was fine, thank you. His voice was a little stiff, the way it had been on the phone.

The third guy turned out to be Stephen Walker, Mollenhauer's imminent son-in-law. He was maybe 25, handsome in a brittle actorish way; his hair, a wavy dark brown, was so flawlessly cut and combed that it looked artificial. When Mollenhauer introduced us, Walker gave me a brief nod and looked right through me. This one I was sure about–snob all the way, as young as he was.

A short awkward silence ensued. They were just a bit uncomfortable because of who and what I was; I was just a bit uncomfortable because of who and what they were. What do the rich and cloistered say to a big inelegant-looking Italian private detective? What does the pulp-reading private eye say to them?

There was only one thing I could think of and I said it: "Have all

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the wedding gifts been delivered, Mr. Mollenhauer?"

"Yes. All except a special gift for my daughter from me. It should arrive any moment."

"If you'll show me where they are–"

"Certainly." He looked at Hickox. "George, if the man from the jewelry store should come before I return, bring him to the gift room."

"Of course, Mr. Mollenhauer."

Mollenhauer took me back through the house, down another hallway, and finally into a long rear wing; neither of us spoke. The near half of the wing's outer wall was made of glass and through it you could see a stadium-sized terrace with an L-shaped swimming pool at one end. Three women in maid's uniforms were busily setting up buffet and bar tables and arranging pieces of white, wrought-iron garden furniture. It was going to be quite a party; there was even a dais for an orchestra.

We went all the way to the end of the wing, where a window in the back wall looked out past a screen of shrubbery to more rolling lawn and more black oaks. Mollenhauer stopped in front of the last door on the left and unlocked it. He led me inside.

The room's normal function was probably that of a spare bedroom; now it was jammed, like a kid's dream of Christmas, with what had to be well over 200 gaily wrapped packages of varying sizes and shapes. They were everywhere–along the walls, on the double bed, and on all the other furniture–but you could tell that they had been laid out by careful hands, to avoid possible damage. A small table had even been positioned near the foot of the bed to hold the tinier presents; the seven packages on it had been arranged in a row, three with pink bows and three with blue bows and one with a white bow in the middle. Cute.

The only entrance to the room was the door we had just come through; an open door on my left revealed an enclosed bathroom, and a pair of closed sliding doors adjacent figured to conceal a closet. In the back wall was a wide window that offered the same view as the one in the hallway.

I went over to the window first. It was catch-locked and also bolt-locked–as a general precaution against burglars, not just to protect the wedding presents, because the bolt was not new. From there I moved into the bathroom. A window in there, too, high up in the wall; it was also double-locked. I went back into the room and opened the sliding doors and looked inside the empty closet.

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Mollenhauer watched me do all that without saying anything. But when I reclosed the closet doors he spoke for the first time since we had left the study. "I had my staff make certain the room was secure before any of the gifts were brought in."

"I have no doubt of that, sir," I said. "It's just that when I take on a job I like to be thorough."

He seemed to approve of that. "Do you have any questions?"

"Just one. Would you like me to stay in here the whole time or out in the hall?"

"The hall, I think. You can take a chair from the other guest bedroom across the way. It's rather overcrowded in here; you wouldn't be comfortable."

Uh-huh, I thought. He did not give much of a damn about my comfort. He wanted me out in the hall so he could lock the door again when he left me alone, in case I happened to have any larcenous ideas myself toward the presents. Just another general precaution.

There was movement out in the hallway and we both turned. The young bridegroom, Walker, appeared and came inside, followed by a short wispy-looking guy about 40, wearing a pin-striped suit and carrying a small gift box with a fancy pink bow on top. Hickox was there, too; he came in last, which used up just about all the extra space in the room.

"This is Mr. Patton, sir," Hickox said to Mollenhauer. "From Grayson Jewelers."

Mollenhauer acknowledged the wispy guy with a nod.

Patton said, "Would you care to examine the ring, sir?" He had a voice like the squeak of a mouse.

"Yes," Mollenhauer said. "I would."

The wispy guy put the gift box down on the table and took off its lid. Tissue paper rustled as he reached inside. A moment later he came up with a little blue-velvet ring case, snapped it open, and handed it to Mollenhauer.

I had a glimpse of the ring it contained. A gold scrolled job with a patina of age, indicating that it was probably an heirloom, with a diamond mounted on it as big as a cherry. The diamond's facets caught the room light and reflected it dazzlingly. I did not know much about precious stones, but a conservative estimate of that baby's worth had to be at least five figures.

"Perfect," Mollenhauer said. "You've done an excellent job with the setting."

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Patton beamed at him. "Thank you, sir."

"Marcia will adore it, Clyde," Walker said. He sounded as if he adored it, too–it or what it was worth. "It belonged to your grandmother, didn't it?"

"Yes. Of course, the original stone was much smaller."

Of course, I thought.

Hickox said, "It's after one, Mr. Mollenhauer. Shouldn't we be getting started for the church?"

"Yes, you're right." Mollenhauer closed the case, and Hickox took it and returned it to the gift box for him. He arranged the tissue paper over it and then put the lid back on.

When the four of them turned from the table Mollenhauer looked at me and frowned; the frown said he had forgotten I was there–me and my big private eyes, taking in the tempting sight of that ring. He made an abrupt gesture for me to go out into the hallway. I went, and stood against the far wall while he and the rest of them filed out.

Mollenhauer shut off the lights, locked the door, and tested the knob a couple of times. Then he said to me, "The reception begins at four. You'll be on duty until seven, when Mr. Walker and my daughter will begin opening their gifts on the terrace."

Hickox had already told me. But I said, "I understand."

He nodded and put his back to me; he had nothing more to say. For all the attention the other three paid me, I might have been a floor lamp. I did not even get a glance as Mollenhauer led them away.

After they were gone I got a chair out of the second spare bedroom and placed it so I could watch the door to the gift room, the window in the rear wall, and the length of the hallway. Then I made myself comfortable and took one of the pulps out of the portfolio case–*Double Detective* for February 1938. I opened it on my lap.

Time passed, not slowly and not unpleasantly. The pulp had some good stuff in it–stories by Cornell Woolrich and Judson Philips, a short novel by Norbert Davis–and it kept my mind well occupied. From time to time sounds drifted in from the terrace and once I heard someone call out that the caterers had arrived; otherwise the wing was hushed. Nobody came to check up on me and nobody came to steal the wedding gifts.

This was a nice easy job, all right. I spend a lot of my Saturday afternoons reading in a quiet place, and here I was being paid good money for doing just that.

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It was 3:50, and I was about to get up for the third time to stretch my legs, when the wedding procession arrived from the church. A silent procession, without the usual blaring of horns; the rich people of Ross evidently felt themselves above that particular postnuptial custom. I did not even know they were there until voices and laughter rose from the front of the house and the orchestra began playing on the terrace.

Hickox paid me a call as the reception party got under way, no doubt at Mollenhauer's instructions, to ask if everything was in order. I said it was. He went away again and I returned to my reading.

Dusk settled around five. They put the terrace lights on then; I could see the outspill through the window. Judging from the noise level, which was low, the party was somewhat restrained. Even the orchestra played nothing but soft background music.

At 5:30 a maid surprised me with supper on a tray; Hickox had told me on the phone I would be fed but I had not expected anyone to remember. It was stuff from the party buffet: canapés, half a dozen little sandwiches with the bread crust trimmed off, two kinds of salad, and coffee. I ate all of it. Not as good as deli food and beer, to my taste, but then maybe I *am* just a lowbrow.

I had finished reading *Double Detective* and had opened up a second pulp–a 1941 issue of *Dime Detective*. The lead novelette was another by Norbert Davis, this one about a hardboiled but wacky private eye named Max Latin. I like Davis' work a good deal; unlike other pulp writers, he had a wild and irreverent sense of humor.

I was engrossed in the story, almost to the end of it, when the glass shattered inside the gift room.

It was an explosive sound and it brought me to my feet in a convulsive jump. Confusion kept me standing in place for a second or two; the noise of the crash faded but after-echoes seemed to linger in the hallway. Jerkily I dropped the magazine, dragged the .38 out of its holster, and lunged across to the door. I caught hold of the knob and threw my shoulder against the panel. The lock creaked but held fast.

Inside the room something clattered and there were a series of thumping sounds.

I stepped back, raised my right foot, and drove the sole of my shoe against the panel just above the latch. The third time I did that, the lock screeched loose and the door wobbled inward. I went in after it in a low crouch, the gun up in front of me, and reached out

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with my left hand to snap on the lights.

The room and its adjoining bath were empty.

That made me blink. And what I saw scattered across the floor brought a dry metallic taste to my mouth: two of the white-bowed and three of the pink-bowed little packages from the table were on the floor; the lid was off the one that had contained Mollenhauer's diamond ring, the tissue paper from inside spilled out; in the middle of the paper lay the blue-velvet ring case, popped open and resting at an angle that let me have a clear look inside.

As empty as the room. The ring was gone.

I straightened, ran to the window in the rear wall. A gaping hole had been broken out of it; the frame was serrated with jagged shards of glass. I shoved my head through the opening. But there was nobody in the shrubbery outside, nobody on the night-shadowed grounds between the wing and the carriage house or the estate's boundary walls.

What the *hell*–?

I pulled my head back in, spun around, and raced back into the hallway. The bolt-lock on the window there released easily but the catch-lock was stuck; I wrenched at it, cursing, managed to get it loose. Outside, a short man and a tall bejeweled woman had appeared from somewhere and were making a tentative approach across the lawn. When they saw me heave the sash upward, climb out over the sill, both of them recoiled and began to back up, wearing frightened expressions. But it was not so much me they were reacting to, I realized, as the gun I still carried in my right hand.

I yelled, "It's all right, I'm a private guard," to keep them from panicking, and shoved the .38 back into its holster; if I had been thinking clearly I would not have come out here with it drawn. "Get Mr. Mollenhauer. Quick!"

A cool evening breeze had come up; I could feel it icing the sweat on my forehead as I lumbered over to where I could look along the front of the wing and out toward the entrance drive. The parking circle was floodlit from night spots set around the base of the fountain, allowing me a clear view of the 40 or 50 cars which crowded it. No movement anywhere among them. And no movement anywhere else in the vicinity, either.

When I turned back the woman was gone and the short man was standing alone, gawking alternately at me and at the broken window. I said as I neared him, "Did you see anybody running away from here before I came out?"

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"No. For God's sake, what–"

Before he could finish the sentence, Mollenhauer came charging around the corner from the terrace; half a dozen other people trailed after him. He took one incredulous look at the window, another at me, and demanded peremptorily, "What happened here?"

"I'm not sure," I said.

"You're not *sure*?"

"No, sir. It all went down pretty fast–"

"The presents? Marcia's ring?"

I made a helpless gesture. "The ring is gone. Whoever smashed the window got away with it."

He glared at me with his eyes snapping and his hands bunched up at his sides. I looked away from him, over at the window. He said something else to me after a couple of seconds, but I did not hear what it was; I was staring toward the window by then, at what lay across the lawn beneath it, and there was a bristling coldness on the back of my neck.

Shards of glass–that was what lay on the lawn. Scattered outward away from the wall for two or three feet, glinting blackly in the spill of light from the gift room. In the confusion I had not registered them before, but now that I had I could not believe what I was seeing.

They should not have been there. They should have been on the floor inside the room, because if you shatter a window from outside the broken glass will always fall inward. That the shards were on the lawn could only mean one thing, and that thing was impossible.

The window had been broken *from the inside.*

It took the police just about 15 minutes to respond to Mollenhauer's summons. But those 15 minutes were chaotic. Word of the theft spread among the assembled guests and broke up the party posthaste. A few of the people left, presumably to avoid the inconvenience of being detained by a lengthy police investigation; nobody made any effort to stop them, and I had neither the authority nor the inclination to try it myself. The rest milled around on the terrace or inside the house in nervous little groups.

I wanted to wait in or near the gift room, but Mollenhauer was not having any of that. He subjected me to a two-minute harangue, during which he called me an incompetent idiot, hinted I might even have had something to do with the robbery myself, and threatened to use his influence to have my investigator's license revoked. I took

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all that without saying anything–there was no point in trying to reason with him while he was this upset–and did my waiting and worrying where he insisted I should, in the study.

Five minutes after the door chimes sounded and the police trooped in, they got around to me. The guy who came in then was a broad chunky type with olive-green eyes and a mop of pewter-colored hair, dressed in plain clothes. He was also a slow-moving, slow-talking type; the impression you got was that he deliberated each movement and each word before going ahead with them. His name was Banducci and his official title was lieutenant.

Apparently Mollenhauer had not bothered to give him my name; when I showed him the photostat of my license he raised an eyebrow and said, "You a *paisan*?"

"Yes. Swiss-Italian."

"Uh-huh. My people were Romano." He shrugged, dismissing the subject of ancestries. "Okay, let's have your version of what took place tonight."

I gave it to him.

"So you didn't see anybody after you broke into the room," he said when I was done. "Not inside and not outside on the ground."

"No. Except for the man and woman I told you about."

"How long was it from the time you heard the glass break to the time you got the door kicked in?"

"Thirty seconds, maybe. Forty-five at the most."

The eyebrow went up again. "That's not much time for somebody to come in through the window, grab the ring, go back out, and disappear."

"I know," I said. The time factor had been bothering me too, along with the broken window and the location of the glass shards. "But that's how it was."

"Mm," Banducci said. His voice was noncommittal. "Suppose you wait here while we go over the gift room. I'll want to talk to you again after that."

"Fine."

"One thing before I go. Mr. Mollenhauer tells me you're armed."

"Yes. I've got a carry permit for a handgun, if you want to see it."

"Maybe later. You mind checking your weapon with me for the time being?"

It was a procedure request and it did not have to mean anything. Or then again, maybe Mollenhauer had put a bug in his ear about me. I said, "Not at all," and pushed my coat back and took the .38

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out of its holster. Carefully, with my thumb and forefinger, I handed it to him butt first.

"Thanks," he said. He nodded to me, put the gun into his coat pocket, and went out and left me alone again.

I sat down on an antique sofa and wished, as I had been wishing for the past 20 minutes, that I could smoke a cigarette. It was times like this, times of stress, that the urge for one was strongest. But I had given the things up more than a year ago, when the doctor I went to about a chronic cough discovered a lesion on one of my lungs. The lesion was benign, but he had warned me another one could develop that would turn out to be malignant. Nothing can make a heavy smoker quit and stay quit like the imminent threat of lung cancer.

So I sat there in the empty room and fought the urge and brooded about the theft of Marcia Mollenhauer's diamond ring. The facts as I knew them were muddy and damned improbable. How could the window have been broken from inside the gift room? How could the thief have got away with the ring in less than a minute? Questions without answers, at least for the moment. And questions which seemed to contradict my explanation of the facts.

A nice easy job. Yeah.

Another 25 minutes crawled away, heavy with tension, before I had company again. This time it was another plainclothesman whose name I never did get. He stood just inside the doorway and crooked a hand at me. "Lieutenant Banducci wants to see you," he said.

I stood up and went out with him, through the house and back into the rear wing. On the way we encountered Hickox, Walker, and a pretty dark-haired girl of about 20–Mollenhauer's daughter, obviously, because she was still wearing her bridal gown. The girl paid no attention to me; her eyes were red-rimmed and her expression was tragic and remote. But both Hickox and Walker pinned me with passing glares, the kid's a down-the-nose look full of loathing. If he had any decent qualities, that boy, they were well hidden. I wondered if Marcia Mollenhauer was anything like him, or if she had made a serious mistake she would one day regret.

Banducci was alone in the gift room, standing by the window and watching a couple of other cops working the grounds outside with flashlights. He turned as we came in and moved over in front of me. His movements were still ponderous, but there was a hard edge now in his eyes and in the set of his mouth.

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"Okay, *paisan*," he said, and he put a different inflection on the Italian word this time, almost accusing, as if he had come to consider me a disgrace to our mutual heritage. "Let's go over your story again."

I nodded and repeated it to him, carefully, omitting none of the details. Nothing changed in his expression; but his eyes seemed to darken, to take on an even harder edge. The tension in me sharpened to anxiety. I didn't like the way things were shaping up.

Banducci was silent for a time. Then he said deliberately, "Must be at least two hundred packages in here, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes."

"And all of them still gift-wrapped."

"I know what you're getting at," I said. "How did the thief know which package contained the ring? And he had to know, all right; the ring box was the only one opened."

"So how do you explain that?"

"An inside job," I said. "Has to be."

"Sure. An inside job. How many people saw the ring and its gift-box after it was delivered this afternoon?"

"Mollenhauer, his secretary, his son-in-law, and the guy from the jewelry store."

"And you," Banducci said.

"Yes. And me."

"Which makes one of you five the probable guilty party."

"It adds up that way, yeah."

"But it wasn't you, right?"

"No. I told you what happened, all of it. The truth."

"The truth," he repeated. "One of the other four, according to your story, broke in the window, came inside, opened the gift box and the ring case, took the ring, went back through the window, and got clear away."

I didn't say anything.

"And he did all of that in less than a minute. According to your story."

"Look, I know it sounds impossible–"

"It doesn't *sound* impossible; it *is* impossible." He motioned me over to the window. "Take a look at this hole," he said. "Jagged pieces all around the frame–top, bottom, and sides. You see any blood on those pieces? Bits of cloth or anything like that?"

"No."

"But a man is supposed to have gone through there not once but

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twice, over and through all those sharp edges of glass, without once cutting himself or tearing his clothes. You think that's possible?"

"No."

"No," Banducci agreed. "Look at the floor under the window. What do you see?"

Here it comes, I thought. I said, "Nothing. The broken glass is all outside on the lawn."

"Oh, you realized that, did you?"

"Yes. Just after it happened."

"Then you also realize what it means: this window couldn't have been smashed from the outside, as you claim it was."

"I didn't claim it was smashed from outside," I said. "All I know is that I heard the glass shatter, and that's all I reported to you."

"The fact is, it was broken from *inside* this room–a locked empty room by your own testimony. Now how do you account for that?"

"I can't account for it."

"I can," Banducci said tightly. "How does this sound? You saw that diamond ring today and figured what it was worth, and while you were sitting out in the hallway you worked up a little plan to steal it. You kicked in the door, grabbed the ring, and then broke the window yourself. From in here, forgetting until afterward where the broken glass would fall."

"I didn't do any of that."

"The evidence says you did."

"I don't care what the evidence says. Listen, go ahead and search me. Search my car."

"We'll do just that. But I doubt if we'll find the ring that way. You'd be too smart to have it on you or in your car."

"Then what the hell am I supposed to have done with it?"

"Stashed it somewhere on the grounds nearby. You had enough time. And it wouldn't have been too difficult for you to come back one of these nights, late, to pick it up."

I had to struggle to control a surge of anger. Letting it out would only make matters worse for me, by giving the confrontation between us a personal angle. Banducci was just a cop doing his job, interpreting the facts as he saw them–the same way I might have interpreted them myself if our roles were reversed. I couldn't blame him for the position I was in.

In level tones I said, "Run a check into my background. Call Lieutenant Eberhardt on the San Francisco police force–he'll vouch for my honesty."

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Banducci sighed. "References aren't going to help you much, *paisan*. Not with evidence like we've got here."

"I'm telling you, I did not steal that ring."

"Sure," he said. "That's about what they all say–right up to the time the gates close behind them at San Quentin."

They did not take me straight to jail. I supposed Banducci, in his methodical way, wanted his men to finish combing the grounds first before he booked me; if they found the ring, to his way of thinking, it would solidify his case. But he did read me my rights from a Miranda card–I told him I would waive right of counsel for the time being, but that if he officially charged me with theft I would not answer any more questions without a lawyer present–and then had me searched and put under guard in another of the spare bedrooms. No handcuffs, but two patrolmen in there with me instead of just one.

I sat on the bed, fidgeting, and tried to think. None of it made sense. The window could not have been broken from the inside–not unless someone had been hiding in the room all afternoon, and that was a literal impossibility; the five of us had left together, and I had checked the room over thoroughly. No one should have been able to come through those sharp edges of glass without leaving some sort of trace of his passage. No one should have been able to accomplish the theft and then escape in a span of 30 to 45 seconds. And yet someone had to have been in the room; I had *heard* him in there, knocking packages to the floor, stealing the ring.

Impossible, all of it.

Except that it had happened, somehow and some way. There *had* to be a logical explanation.

One of the other four, I thought–Mollenhauer, Hickox, Walker, or Patton. But which one? None of them seemed a likely candidate, considering who and what they were; any of them could be clever enough to have planned out a caper of this complexity. It had not just been designed to net him the ring under mysterious circumstances–that much I was sure of, now. It had been designed so that all the evidence would point straight at me.

A neat tight little frame.

Mollenhauer, Hickox, Walker, or Patton.

Something began to nibble at the back of my mind. I shut my eyes and concentrated, visualizing the gift room as I had seen it after breaking in. Everything exactly as it had been when I was in there

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with the four of them at one o'clock, except for the broken window and all the stuff scattered on the floor. Or was it? There seemed to be–

And all at once it came popping through–the difference, the one fact that opened a crack in the frame. I sat motionless, working with it, backtracking. Once I had part of it figured out I remembered something else, too, and worked with that until it all began to pull together.

Bingo.

I stood up and looked at the two patrolmen. "I want to see Lieutenant Banducci."

"What for?" one of them said.

"I know how the theft was done and I know who stole the ring. Tell him that. Get him in here."

It took them a few seconds to make up their minds; they were thinking, was it a trick? Then the one who had spoken drew his weapon, held it on me, and told the other guy to go ahead.

Banducci was there inside of three minutes. "So you know who and how, do you?" he said.

The skepticism was plain in his voice.

I said, "Yes. I can't prove it but I think you can."

"All right, let's hear it."

"Take me to the gift room first."

He took me there, the two patrolmen trailing behind. The items that had been on the floor had been picked up and put back on the table; the open gift box and the ring case carried the residue of fingerprint powder. Otherwise, nothing was changed.

"This better be good," Banducci said. "You're on your way to jail if it isn't."

"It's good." I went to the table. "How many of these little packages were on the floor when you first examined the room?"

He frowned. "Four or five," he said. "Including the one the ring was in."

"Doesn't that strike you as a little odd? The thief knew which one contained the ring. Then why were the others knocked off the table?"

"He–or you–was in a hurry. They were knocked off accidentally."

I shook my head. "The table hasn't been moved from its original position, which means it wasn't bumped into. And even a man in a hurry wouldn't be likely to sweep off four other packages by accident, not when he already knew where the ring was. No, those packages were knocked to the floor as part of a deliberate act."

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"I don't see what you're leading up to–"

"You will." I pointed to the gifts on the table. "There are nine packages here–four with pink bows, counting the gift box for the ring, three with blue bows, and two with white bows."

"So?"

"There were *eight* packages, again counting the ring box, when the five of us were in this room at one o'clock. And only *one* with a white bow."

Banducci's frown deepened into a scowl. "You sure about that?"

"Positive," I said. I picked up the two white-bowed presents. Only one of them had a card attached; I put that one down and shook the other. It was heavy and did not rattle. "If you open this one I'm pretty sure it'll contain something cheap and not very suitable as a wedding gift."

He took it out of my hand, carefully untied its ribbon, and removed the lid. A wad of tissue paper. And the kind of hard plastic paperweight you can buy in a dime store.

"Okay, *paisan*," he said. "So far you've got my attention. If this package wasn't here before the robbery, then how did it get into the room?"

"It was thrown in through the broken window from outside. For the express purpose of knocking the ring box and as many other packages as possible off the table. The ring box was the primary target. The thief wanted it to hit the floor so the lid would pop off and the velvet case would fall out. He couldn't have planned that the case would come open too but it worked in his favor when it did.

"The bogus gift was a pretty clever touch. You need to throw something into a roomful of presents, so you make up a weighted one of your own. Chances are it'll be overlooked, and when it's finally opened it gets passed over as somebody's idea of a practical joke."

Banducci said, "But what's the sense in it? Why knock off the ring box and the other packages?"

"To make me think the thief had come into this room to steal the ring, when in fact he hadn't, and to make you think I was the one who was guilty. If nobody else could have done it, according to the manufactured evidence, it had to be me."

"Are you saying he stole the ring from outside?"

"No," I said. "He stole the ring when all of us were in here at one o'clock."

"Yeah? How did he do that?"

"Simple. He was the last person to touch the case, the one who

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put it back inside the gift box. When he did that, as he was covering the case with the tissue paper, he slipped it open and palmed the ring. None of us suspected anything like that and none of us watched him closely; it was easy for him."

"Easy for who? Who are we talking about here?"

"George Hickox. Mollenhauer's secretary."

Banducci did some ruminating. "Let's say I buy it so far," he said at length. "There's still one fact you haven't accounted for."

"The broken window."

He nodded. "The window that was broken from the inside."

"It *wasn't* broken from the inside," I said. "It was broken from the outside."

"So that all the shards fell out on the lawn? You know that's impossible."

"No, it isn't. No more impossible than any of the rest of it. There's a way to do it."

"What way?"

"Do you know what a suction clamp is?"

"One of those bar gadgets with rubber cups on each end?"

"Right. They're used by house painters along with certain types of scaffolding, among other things, and they're pretty strong. Remember the movie *Topkapi*? It had guys lifting up a heavy glass case with just that kind of clamp."

"And you think Hickox broke the window with one."

"That's what I think. He moistened the rubber cups, shoved them against the windowpane, locked them in place, and then took hold of the bar and gave a hard rocking jerk or two; the glass is relatively thin and the window is wide and Hickox is a brawny man. So the window broke outward, the shards fell to the lawn, and the clamp pulled free. Then he threw the bogus gift at the table in here and ducked around the front corner. He was long gone by the time I got outside."

Banducci ruminated again.

I said, "My guess is that he got the clamp from the painter's scaffolding on the carriage house; maybe you noticed when you came in that that building's being painted. And he probably returned it there afterward. If you can find it, it might have some glass residue that your lab people can match to the window. It might even have Hickox's fingerprints."

"All right," he said, "it all sounds reasonable enough. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt." He turned to the two patrolmen, both of

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whom were standing just inside the door. "One of you go find George Hickox and bring him in here. Let's see what he has to say."

Hickox did not have much to say–not right then, anyway. He put on an indignant act, denied everything, and tried his damnedest to lay the suspicion back on me. But he had grown more and more nervous as I explained again how the robbery was done and he kept wiping beads of sweat off his face. Banducci could read the guilt on him as well as I could; he began to take the same hard line he had taken with me earlier.

The interrogation was still going on when one of the uniformed cops that Banducci had dispatched to the carriage house came running in, bright-eyed with excitement. He had found a detached suction clamp, all right–but that was not all he had found and brought back with him. He had thought to stir around in the cans of paint and turpentine left by the painters, he said, and in one of the turpentine tins–

The missing diamond ring.

You could almost see Hickox come apart then. And when Banducci instructed the patrolman to have both the clamp and the turpentine tin dusted for fingerprints, Hickox broke down completely and admitted it. He had planned the robbery for days, even before making me his random selection as the fall guy; he had suggested to Mollenhauer a detective be hired in the first place. His statement as to why he had decided to commit robbery amounted to two sentences: "I didn't want to keep on being a rich man's secretary. I wanted just a little of what Mollenhauer has for myself."

They put him in handcuffs and took him away. I went away, too–quietly. I had had enough of these people; there was nothing I cared to say to any of them.

That was not quite the end of my dealings with Mr. Clyde Mollenhauer, however. Like Hickox, I wanted just a little of what Mollenhauer had–my fee for the job I had been hired to do. I sent him a bill, got nothing in return, sent him another bill and got nothing for that. I had not expected gratitude, of course, or anything resembling it; but I did expect to get paid.

A third bill produced the same non-results. Maybe he blamed me somehow for the whole affair and all the publicity it got in the newspapers; maybe he had got to be rich by cheating common people out of their due. Whatever the reason, he did not seem to feel he

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owed me a damned thing.

So I had a lawyer I knew write a letter threatening to sue him if he did not pay up. That took care of it; wealthy men do not like to be sued. A check came in the mail a week later.

With my name misspelled.

I smiled a little when I saw that. You'd better stay clear of the heavy-sugar crowd from now on, I told myself. You can't cope with them; they'll find a way to put you in your place every time. You common pulp-reading ethnic private eye, you.

DETECTIVERSE

PUT AND TAKE

by VIRGIL STRIEBY

A creature of habit was Timothy Quinn.
He held up the bank that he kept money in.
The teller politely reduced the amount
Of the money he stole from his savings account.

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a *NEW* short story by

REX BURNS

We welcome Rex Burns's first appearance in EQMM, with a regional story that will leave you with a shudder . . . The author was born in San Diego, California to a third generation Navy family. He traveled in China before World War Two, and during that war served with the Marines in the Far East. He was a Fulbright lecturer in Thessaloniki, Greece, in 1969-70, and in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1977. Since 1968, as a Professor of English, he has taught American Literature at the University of Colorado at Denver and currently he heads that university's program for aspiring writers.

Dr. Burns's first novel, THE ALVAREZ JOURNAL, *featured a Chicago detective named Gabriel Wager. The book won the coveted Edgar awarded by MWA (Mystery Writers of America) for the best first mystery novel published in 1975. As of the time of this writing, there have been two more novels about Gabriel Wager, and since he is now a series character, we hope the author will write some of Wager's shorter detective adventures for EQMM . . .*

SHERMAN'S HORSE

by *REX BURNS*

In summer evenings at that time between light and dark when things run together into a world that is half familiar and half new, old man Willard and I would come home from hunting. His rifle always rode easy on a shoulder whose flesh had long dried but whose bones were still square and straight. My rifle bounced up and down in the short hairs at the nape of my neck, and even today I can't carry a weapon as smooth and easy as I remember that old man doing.

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If the day had been good, if the old man's eyes and hands had been as true as his rifle, if the earth beneath our feet was cool enough and the piney woods dry enough so that only a few mosquitoes whined about our ears, he would walk slow and tell again the story of Sherman's horse.

His voice, which one time must have been deep, was again high and creaked a good deal, and I like to think it sounded much as it did that far-off day when as a boy he actually did it. He and the people he named—why, even my father recognized them only as names and not as people, names whose bones were dust, and the dust itself nothing more than a sunken spot out at Cypress Hill. Yet those names echoed louder than many of the voices of the so-called living.

The names the old man spoke were of those who had gone North, and in their sound was the sound of other names—Atlanta, Vicksburg, Cemetery Ridge, Malvern Hill, Manassas, Shiloh. All with thunder enough to lend weight to the names old man Willard recalled. He told of the Yankees who began to move south with that inevitability of things in nightmares, and of the bells that rang alarm but did not end the nightmare. The bells meant They had come. And old man Willard and boys his age and even younger fell in beside their grandfathers and great-grandfathers to form the two awkward platoons that tried to stop an army.

"Alvin Crebbins and me was no older than you, boy, when we was put on picket down close to Waterford near where young Burkett used to have a farm. It was about ten in the morning when we saw the first blue coats come riding up the bank on the far side looking for the ford. Two of the cavalry, it was, a corporal and a private. They found where the bank was wore down for the crossing, and the corporal he sent the private about halfway across to make sure, while me and Alvin lay just as still not even breathing, wondering if we ought to run before that big rascal of a horse stomped right on us. I tell you, he was that big!

"Just as we gathered up to bust out running, the corporal called the private back. A little while later, up come this man—though at the time we didn't neither of us know who—on a big gray and white mare, and I told Alvin that anybody that everybody was always talking at must be an officer, and he said, 'Sure enough.' And while we watched, the officer got down and studied this way and that, and I swear he looked right at Alvin and me in that clump of cattails, and then he got back up and started across right at us.

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" 'I'm going to shoot him,' I said.

" 'You better not,' Alvin said. 'We wasn't told to shoot nobody.'

" 'Well, you go on home if you're scared,' I said, 'because I'm going to shoot him sure as you're born.'

" 'I ain't scared and I ain't going home, neither,' Alvin said, and sure enough he laid right there beside me and held onto the sack of cartridges while I cleaned the dust off the front sight and lay the piece and held my breath and squoze slow on the trigger.

"It went off and Alvin hollered, 'You got the sucker!' And when the smoke blew away I saw the horse was down and the officer hopping up and cussing and swatting mud and grass off his pants with his hat. By then the limbs and leaves was bouncing all around us and me and Alvin crawled like fire out of there and lit out screaming, 'Here come the Yankees!' It wasn't until two days later, when we was hauled out of the woods by skirmishers, that we learned it was General Sherman—Sherman himself."

The story was always the same, hardly a word changed, until it was like a prayer you can say without even reading the words in the prayer book. And like the prayer, there was no call to say, "My!" or "Think of that!"

Anyway, it was almost dark when the old man and I reached the cluster of houses a few people called Brownsville and even fewer called home. It used to be the county seat, but when Governor Carr was elected long before I was born, he moved the county seat to Escambia City, and now Brownsville was just a wide spot in the road with half a dozen houses, the Sundries Store, and Big George's Saloon. Here and there a kerosene lamp shone yellow, though most of the lights were electric now; and from Big George's a patch of hard glare flung out across the oiled dirt of the road. In the blacker shadow of the front porch a cluster of red firefly lights showed where men sat talking and smoking.

A voice called out, "Where you all been?"

The old man didn't answer, so I said, "Hunting."

"Well, Collin," said the voice I recognized now, "I hope that old man ain't been teaching you to shoot horses!"

A cackle of laughter came from the shadows and you could see the cigarettes go up and down as hands slapped knees, and I knew why old man Willard hadn't answered: it was Whitney Malbick and he was with some of the gang from the turpentine works. They didn't give a damn about anything but payday and Big George's liquor, one following the other as naturally as night after day, and

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most of the folks in Brownsville were just waiting for the works to move further up the Escambia River as the timber cutters slashed their way through the piney. But Whitney had grown thick with them, and some said it was because what he boiled out in the woods wasn't turpentine, though it tasted pretty close to it, and cost less. Well, I should have known. I shouldn't have shot off my mouth like that, because there wasn't anything Whitney liked better than somebody to make fun of, and somebody to watch him do it.

As Whitney said time and again, he was always ready for a frolic or a fight, and after the turpentine works moved close by he found plenty of both. One of his favorite frolics was old Willard. Once, when the old man finished his morning's work at Mr. Hall's Sundries Store and fell asleep in his rocker on the front porch, Whitney got everybody in Big George's to come out and watch. Then he sneaked up and put his mouth to the old man's ear and shouted, "Run! Run! Here comes Sherman!" Old man Willard leaped out of his sleep three feet off the porch before he realized there wasn't anything thicker than air under him and fell flat in the dust. Whitney said it was the fastest that old man had pumped his knees since the last time he saw Sherman.

Another time, he went over to the Sundries Store just before closing time, when the old man was sweeping up. Whitney had a ball of mercury he'd taken from some thermometers, and when the old man's back was turned he poured it on the floor. Old man Willard dragged his broom down the strip of linoleum in front of the counter until it hit the mercury and the wad exploded into a hundred beads rolling every which way. Whitney said the old man ran swinging his broom and swearing like a preacher's son, trying half the night to beat that mercury to death.

If Whitney wore on the old man, the only way it showed was in silence. Whenever he saw Whitney, he walked a little straighter and stared a little harder at nothing, and that was all. But Mr. Kruger, who ran Mr. Hall's Sundries Store since he bought it from Mr. Hall some 20 years ago, tried to help. Since neither Mr. Kruger nor his parents or grandparents had been born in the county, he was still a stranger, and that gave him the same freedom to say things that children and idiot-folk had. So he went to Whitney and asked him to please quit teasing the old man.

"That old man can't come over and ask me hisself?"

"That old man don't know I'm over here—and wouldn't of let me come a step did I even hint about it."

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Whitney chewed and spit and nodded. "Well, I reckon that old man's about right. He can look after his own business. Why don't you?"

Along with the freedom of being a stranger went the weightlessness of being no-account on any scale but one. Mr. Kruger wiped his hands on the gray apron drawn tight across his stomach and looked into Whitney's eyes that had turned almost sleepy, though Whitney himself was far from it. Then Mr. Kruger walked back across the street to the Sundries Store, not wanting—maybe not able—to be weighed on that one scale that every stranger was allowed.

The day after Whitney had hollered out at us, I saw the old man sitting in his chair in front of the Sundries Store talking to a handful of men. One of them was a drummer with yellow shoes up from Mobile who came through four times a year with cloth samples and dress patterns, and the rest were in from the turpentine works for the Saturday-afternoon drunk. From Big George's, the jukebox was already thumping with that bass pulse that would build through Saturday, Saturday night, and into Sunday morning, carrying further and further as the air cooled and ending only when the last Ford or Chevy or even, in some cases, buckboard started up the nameless dirt tracks among the trees. But as yet it was too early to start if the serious drinking was to last that long, and Whitney was nowhere in sight.

So I thought maybe that was why the old man was telling them the story of Sherman's Horse. His voice rose as he played like Alvin Crebbins—"You better not! We wasn't told to shoot nobody"—and fell with his long-ago answer, "Well, you go on home if you're scared." And then I saw Whitney creep out of the Sundries Store behind the old man, a broomstick over his shoulder like a rifle. He began to act out everything the old man said, but angling his elbows and bugging his eyes so that one by one the men snickered and shuffled and tried to keep straight faces until one of them just busted out laughing and then they all almost fell off the porch from laughing so hard.

The old man, caught up in the story, didn't catch on until the howling was so loud he couldn't hear his own voice. Then he looked around to where the drummer, both yellow shoes off the floor and eyes squeezing tears, was pointing.

The old man saw Whitney, and his face got red and then pale, and he clapped his lips to and stared and rocked in silence.

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"Hey, you all watch this," said Whitney. He hunched over and lifted his knees as high as his ears and tiptoed across the porch, "Me and Alvin snuck down to Waterford to shoot old Sherman's horse!"

"Mister," said the drummer, trying to get his breath between giggles, "You and Mr. Willard here ought to do vaudeville together. I swear I ain't laughed so hard in a month!"

Whitney stood to attention and pushed the broomstick around like a soldier, then leaned over behind the old man to shout, "Run! Here comes Sherman!"

The pale lean face didn't twitch.

"If you rock any faster, old man, you're gonna fly that thing off the porch," said Whitney.

But the old man rocked like Whitney wasn't there, and a couple of the men, still laughing, started across the street toward the sound of the jukebox. Then Whitney saw me standing there with my rifle.

"Collin," he said, "don't you think it must be awful easy to shoot a horse at three hundred yards?"

I shrugged, not wanting to be part of it.

The men paused and Whitney raised his voice. "Of course it's maybe easier now than sixty-seventy years ago—rifles and men are better now. Don't you think, old man?"

The old man's face grew mottled again, and he kept his lips pressed shut.

"There's some people who'd say shooting horses at three hundred yards was something special. Hell, Collin, even you can shoot better than that!"

The old man went an even deeper red and stood up slowly. "Collin," he said, "go get my rifle." His gray eyes finally lit on Whitney. "You get your rifle. I'll show you shooting."

By the time Whitney got back with his rifle, everyone in Brownsville and in the piney beyond seemed to know about it. The people who had heard old man Willard call out Whitney were telling the others how it happened. A few said the old man could outshoot Whitney, but these were generally people Whitney had played a joke on. Most knew Whitney for a good shot, and the men from the turpentine works who called odds couldn't find many to take them up.

Whitney marched right back down the middle of the street, rifle across both shoulders and grinning at the turnout. He took a drink from a Mason jar someone held out, hollered, 'Heyo' here and there,

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stopped to talk to the Partridge sisters who both turned pink and giggled, and then came up to the edge of the Sundries Store porch.

"Always ready for a frolic or a fight, old man. What's the match rules?"

Old man Willard drug his fingers through his stringy chinwhiskers. "Three shots, fifty yards, at a four-bit piece."

Whitney balked. "Whose four-bit piece?"

"I got one."

"Only fifty yards? I thought sure you'd make it three hundred! Where we going to prop it?"

Old man Willard's eyes weren't rheumy at all. They were sharp and bright as snake's eyes. "We'll hold it."

Whitney looked at the old man as if he thought he was crazy. "Hold it? Why?"

"Because it takes guts to shoot at a living target, and more guts to stand there and know you're going to be shot at. I don't think you got the guts."

There wasn't much Whitney could say when the old man put it that way. He picked up some dirt and dried his hands with it. "Who shoots first?"

"You."

The drummer put two scratch lines in the oiled dirt of the street, and Whitney went to one of them and the old man went to the other. He propped his hand with a hoe handle to keep his arm from moving and making a shaky target. One of the turpentine gang ran the odds up to five-to-one on the first shot before anybody took him up. Folks in Brownsville had seen Whitney shoot and knew he was good, but five-to-one is too much for some people, and the two spit on their hands and shook to seal the bet.

Whitney said, "Give me two bits of that easy money," and stepped to the line. He stared down at the old man who looked like a scarecrow with one arm propped out. Then Whitney raised his rifle. Then he put it down. "I can't tell which one's the old man and which one's the hoe handle," he said. Then he raised the rifle again and sighted in. It was quiet enough to hear a flea bite, and I held my breath while Whitney sighted and finally when I couldn't hold my breath any longer and my mind was screaming for Whitney to shoot, he did.

Old man Willard's arm jerked up and the coin went spinning into the dirt at the side of the road. Everyone whooped and the odds on the next shot went to three-to-one. "Get the coin, boy," the drummer

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hollered at me and I went after it and got it, and there wasn't a mark on it. We looked at the old man who had picked up the hoe handle and was leaning on it.

"You missed, Whitney," the old man said and held up his hand. The end was gone from his left forefinger and dark blood welled up thick and slow and channeled through the dust on his hand to run in quick drops onto the street. He pulled a thread from his overalls and wrapped it around his finger and propped his hand only half the distance from his head that it was at first. "You got two more shots," he said.

The odds went to eight-to-one. Whitney pulled a long drink from the Mason jar and laughed and said, "This time don't move your hand, old man." Then he stepped back to the line.

The second time was twice as long, and the shot sounded like doomsday, which many thought it was for the old man. But nothing happened, and the crowd began to murmur odds again.

"Your last shot, Whitney." The old man stepped up to the hoe handle so that the coin was almost under his chin.

"I know what you're doing, old man—I ain't going to shy away. I'm telling you!"

"Your last shot," old man Willard said again, and didn't move back an inch.

"That crazy-man thinks he's going to make me shy away," said Whitney. "You ready, old man?"

The figure stood without moving.

Even the odds-callers were quiet as Whitney aimed. The click of the hammer sounded like a shot, and when the rifle went off it was as loud as a cannon. The coin flipped through the air like a butterfly and landed in the dirt. This time it had a good-sized dent near its edge.

Whitney took a long swig from the Mason jar and howled, "Whoooeee! That's shooting!" and everybody clapped him on the back and answered, "Yeah!"

"What you think of that, old man?"

"I think it's your turn to hold the coin. Hand me my rifle, Collin."

The old man sighted and pulled the trigger almost as soon as the rifle was leveled. It was the same way he did when hunting. Nothing happened, and somebody whispered, "Ten-to-one on the second shot," and somebody answered, "Done."

Whitney held up his forefinger and wiggled it at the old man. One of the Partridge sisters giggled and then clapped her hands

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over her mouth. Whitney propped the coin halfway to his chin.

The second time, old man Willard took longer to aim. He squinted one eye shut, touched his nose to the stock, and squeezed the trigger. The bullet jumped in the dust down where the pines rose outside town. Whitney shouted, "The best you can do is tie, old man!" He took the coin and instead of holding it an inch or so beneath his chin like old man Willard had done, he propped his chin on top of the finger that held the four-bit piece.

The old man leaned on his rifle for a few minutes before making up his mind to shoot. Whitney winked at the Partridge girls and wiggled his finger once more. If he was scared, nobody saw it. Finally old man Willard lifted the rifle and slowly sighted in. The same voice whispered, "Fifteen-to-one," but nobody answered him.

The old man drew in a slow breath and while he was inhaling, fired and missed and shot Whitney Malbick right in the head.

Whitney hung there with a small hole opened up on his right cheek, and almost no blood coming out through the rim of blued flesh. There was no sound at all as he sagged chin up onto the hoe handle, swayed, and fell. Then one of the Partridge girls started giggling again.

The sound choked, gurgled, and broke out until she shrieked even when she inhaled. Somebody grabbed her and shook her and four people picked up Whitney, and both him and the girl were carted toward the Sundries Store. Two of the turpentine gang started arguing about whether or not bets were off, and somebody else tried to make off with the fifty-cent piece. But the drummer saw him and grabbed it and said he was going to frame it and hang it in Big George's, compliments of Taylor's Fine Fabrics, and all the people said, "Yes, do!"

Old man Willard stood at the scratch line, the blood from his tied-off finger plopping into the dust. I spoke to him and he slowly turned his eyes from where they toted Whitney through the doorway. "I knew all along I couldn't hit anything the size of that coin," he said, and walked off.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

THOMAS WALSH

We don't know any writer in the mystery field who puts more heart into a cop story than Thomas Walsh—that has always been his trademark, his outstanding quality. And in this story Mr. Walsh writes from the deepest recesses of his own heart . . . Detective Richie Sullivan, orphaned at six, was the product of three state institutions and five foster families. He had learned to depend only on himself. He had never asked for anything—he had learned better from life. . .

LOOKING OUT FOR NUMBER ONE

by THOMAS WALSH

That night there was a sudden March shower. It came up just as Richie Sullivan and his girl Meg were leaving the restaurant, and it led to an unintended collision in the street entrance.

Sullivan was a good-sized man himself, but the other fellow, running in from the rain with a buxom blonde on his arm, had about three inches on him in height, and 30 or 40 pounds in weight. So he did not bother to apologize for knocking Meg into the wall. Sullivan, indeed, was only able to stop her from going all the way down by a quick helping grab at her right arm.

The big fellow–because of the blonde, probably–gave Sullivan a coolly contemptuous look, quite as if it had been Meg's fault. "Seems as if somebody needs a pair of glasses," he remarked insolently to the blonde. "Or maybe they had one too many martinis, hon."

Sullivan felt a cold, rather pleasant prickling up at the back of his neck. He set Meg straight, then put himself in front of the big fellow, right in front.

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"No, it's not that," he said. "I think it's a question of good manners, Jack. I think you should have apologized to the lady. I think you still should. How about it?"

"In a pig's ear," the big fellow said. "Wasn't my fault."

"Richie," Meg said, and put a hand on his arm. "Come on, it's all right."

"I think it better be," the big fellow said, and attempted to push by. "I mean better for him, lady–unless he's looking for a belt in the mouth."

But he did not get by. Sullivan pushed back, with the flat of his right palm, and much harder.

"Looks like somebody might be," he said mildly, "unless there's an apology here to the lady. If you had some manners, Jack, instead of being the big-talking blowhard you so obviously are, you'd have given one without anybody even asking."

Still the big fellow saw nothing to worry about. Steady gray eyes, thin dark brows, long jaw–and of course the one-sided difference in height and weight. He pushed again, truculently.

"Getting out of the way?" he demanded, right fist clenching.

"Uh-huh," Sullivan said. "Try making me, hotshot."

"Okay, fine," the big fellow said. He stepped back, obviously to get proper punching distance with his right hand, but the punch was not even halfway home when Sullivan threw a solid left into his stomach, which was a flabby and considerably out-of-shape stomach. It smashed the big fellow up against the wall, mouth dropping open, all the breath whooshing out of him, and hands down helplessly.

It was probably not necessary to hit him again, but Sullivan did. That time his short vicious right cross knocked the big man sidewise over the arm of a fancy upholstered couch standing against the wall. The blonde began to scream hysterically; waiters came running up; and the big fellow, looking badly dazed, lay back on the couch and shakily wiped blood from his mouth.

"Coming again?" Sullivan inquired softly. "Or you think you might just apologize to the lady now?"

Meg stood back against the other wall, very pale. This time, looking up at Sullivan, the big fellow had better sense.

"Just happened," he succeeded in mumbling. "We were only running in from the rain, that's all. Sorry, lady."

"Now that's it," Sullivan approved, nodding down at him with a cold grin. "Nothing much to it after all. See how easy it is?"

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But Meg had already left. He trotted out after her, feeling fine and bouncy, and saw her running toward his car with her lovely slim legs flashing against a last spatter of raindrops. Then he knew he had made another mistake with her, and his lips tightened. Damn it to hell! What had she expected him to do, anyway?

"What's the matter now?" he asked her, turning on the ignition. "Don't be foolish enough to blame me again, Meg. You saw who started it. What else could I do?"

"I don't know"–face averted, lips quivering a bit. "All I can say is that if you didn't start it, you certainly didn't mind finishing it, did you?"

"All right, go ahead," Sullivan gritted. "Start that silly kind of talk all over again. Sure, I belted him. Who the hell wouldn't?"

"He didn't do it on purpose, Richie. It just happened."

"And so did his nastiness, hah?" His lips curled. "Guys like that I'm just not able to stand. He got what he was asking for, that's all–and you know it as well as I do."

"And that's your excuse, I take it."

"For what?"

"For that second punch you hit him with," and she brushed her hand wearily through her brown hair. "The first time you had to defend yourself. I agree. But the second punch was like deliberately kicking a hurt puppy. Yet you enjoyed doing it. You should have seen the icy grin on your lips. He wasn't a problem any more, Richie. Everyone around could see that he wasn't. And you still–"

"Why don't you talk sense?" Sullivan demanded angrily. "What's the matter with you here lately? Always something these days. Always crabbing at me. But tonight it's like we're yelling at each other from opposite sides of the Grand Canyon. You don't know what I'm trying to say. I don't know what you are."

"That's very true"–coldly, face still averted. "We don't, Richie–and what I'm afraid of now is that maybe we never will."

Sullivan gave her a cold, almost savage glance out of his eye corners.

"Trying to say something about you and me? That it?"

"Perhaps I am," Meg told him, staring out through the window on her side. "I don't think it's any good for us, Richie. Why not face it?"

Sullivan tapped a cigarette out of the pack on his dashboard. He was by nature a quietly reserved young man, but more and more lately now, in arguments like this with her, he had begun to feel

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a sort of ugly masculine pride taking over in him. Whatever you got out of life, Detective Sullivan had found out at 26 years of age, you got for yourself. Nobody ever helped you. It was dog eat dog, no quarter asked, and if you had any brains in your head, no quarter given.

"Then okay. Let's do that," he said. Meg was the only person in the world from whom he could possibly have begged–which was, probably, the one reason why he could never give in so much as an inch to her. "Maybe we're speaking different languages, eh? A slight lack of communication somewhere."

"Not different languages," Meg said. "Just different ways of looking at the riddle of why we're all here, Richie. You depend on yourself–only on yourself. You're a fighter. Because I think, the way you look at it, you can't see anyone else to depend on, not even me."

"Correct," he admitted ironically. "Correct one hundred percent, and all the way, Meg. What you mean is that there is somebody else–or maybe something else? Wish you'd tell me what it is, then, I'd sure like to know."

But such was not a new point of difference between them. She came from a large, jolly, and to Sullivan an incomprehensibly affectionate family, whereas Detective Sullivan, orphaned at six, was a product of three state institutions and five foster families. Nothing had ever been given to him, not even a momentary closeness. Whatever he had got, he had got for himself, fighting it through on his own, always without any help, or even decent kindness, from other people.

There were times when he could not even believe in this very new thing, his feeling for Meg, or hers for him. He wanted her, sure–but as he would have wanted a fine new wristwatch or a luxurious car or a grand Fifth Avenue apartment. His philosophy was that you lived for some years, and then you died–and in between, if you were a sensible man, you looked out for Number One, and nobody else, not ever. You just got out of life all the personal enjoyment it was possible to get, and that was the whole story.

"I don't think I could explain it to you," Meg answered finally. "You can't understand certain things, Richie. Silly things, you'd call them. Things like courage and faith and loyalty."

"Courage?" Sullivan snapped, thin dark brows lowering dangerously. "What the hell are you talking about? I've never been afraid of anyone or anything in my life!"

"Yes, that kind of courage," Meg put in wearily. "But I mean

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facing something you know you can't beat, and facing it anyway. Because something else is more important to you, and because you yourself don't really matter against that. I was beginning to feel that way about you. I was hoping that you were beginning to feel that way about me. That's what I want for myself, Richie–and what you don't."

Sullivan lit another cigarette a bit blindly. He had never asked for anything in his life, because he had learned better, and so he could not ask for anything now, either–not even from Meg.

"There you got it," he replied grimly. "But now I'll tell you something *you* don't understand. Once a yellowbelly, always a yellowbelly. You can't give in even once–because if you do you've given in for the rest of your days. I hit that fourflusher, sure, and I hit him twice. Why not? Didn't you see him try to hit me?"

"That isn't the point. The point is that I saw you enjoying it, Richie. You've got some kind of need to show everyone else how tough and how capable you are. Richie Sullivan doesn't need other people, and he never will. And so I believe it's just about all over for us, Richie. Because I don't think you really need me, either."

Sullivan didn't answer that. He had no idea of how to. All he could have said was that he had never heard such silly talk in his life. Silence fell, and when he dropped her at home he did not even get out of the car. She looked in at him for one last moment, but why bother? Okay with him. She couldn't understand Richie Sullivan, and Richie Sullivan couldn't understand her. And what to do about that? Nothing at all, apparently. Hell with it, then. So long Meg. All the best, kid. Real pleasure knowing you.

At that time he was working narcotics with Eddie Marcus, under Inspector Fogarty. So they had to be Skid Row Bowery bums, dirty, shabbily dressed and unshaven, and every day about three o'clock they sat together on a certain bench in Central Park, swapping a bottle of cheap Muscatel–or what looked like it–back and forth, and apparently paying no attention at all to anyone sitting near them.

It was a cold, rainy spring, and not many people stopped around them to sit. But once or twice the same two people did–one a slim professional-looking man with glittery dark eyes and a dandified goatee, and the other short and swarthy, with powerful shoulders and a battered prizefighter's face.

"And you're sure who they are?" Inspector Fogarty inquired that Friday. "You got the right tip on it from Crullerlegs Mahoney?"

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"Sure as I am of you," Sullivan answered cockily. "The guy with the beard is Dr. Warner. The guy that comes along and talks to him for a minute, like asking him what time it is, is Romeo La Pointe."

"So it looks like at last we've got a lead on J. Elbridge Warner, M.D.," Fogarty mused. "But you couldn't hear what they were talking about, I suppose?"

"Sorry," Eddie Marcus apologized. "About forty feet away, Inspector."

"Anything at all change hands on either side?"

"Not even a matchstick," Sullivan told him. "Could see that, anyway. The doc sits there like he's feeding the pigeons, and Romeo comes up and talks for a minute, like they're passing a remark about the weather. Then they separate. The doc sits there still feeding the pigeons, then throws his empty bag away, lights a cigar, and strolls home. He doesn't see Romeo again. He doesn't talk to anyone at all. Just straight home."

So arrangements were made. The other bench was unoccupied the next afternoon–a fine sunny afternoon–but all the neighboring ones were taken. One was marked Wet Paint; on another two teenage schoolgirls chattered away, recruited by Sullivan at two dollars apiece; and so that day Dr. Warner had to sit on the same bench as before. Coming along with his bag of bird food, the doctor placed himself right where Sullivan and Marcus wanted him to be and everything went fine.

"Microphone worked just swell. They're going to make the exchange tomorrow afternoon at four o'clock," Sullivan exulted a bit later to the inspector. "Good place, too. Middle of the rush hour, right outside Penn Station. Warner's boy comes along in a black Buick. Romeo's boy–they didn't use either name, so it might be anybody–walks up to it and gets in. Then they ride around for a couple of blocks with Romeo's boy showing that he brought the heroin, and the other man had brought the money. Pretty cute, eh? Romeo and Warner aren't anywhere around. Their only contact is on that park bench."

"Then watch your step," Fogarty ordered. "We know Romeo's tough, and I'd say his boy is, too. Don't take any chances on them. Bring Doolittle and McCoy along with you."

It was fine to get all cleaned up again for the climax, so fine that Sullivan almost called Meg that night. In the end, however, he didn't; no begging. You had to stand alone in this world, and to stand for yourself. There was only one sensible way to end the thing,

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since he and Meg were all finished. Out of sight, out of mind, as the old saying had it. No use prolonging the thing. Better simply to cut it short.

And outside Penn Station next afternoon other arrangements were made. For once, the No Parking rule there was strictly enforced by a uniformed patrolman, but at four o'clock, when a black Buick came along, the patrolman vanished around the nearest corner. An old Ford was parked down just a bit, and Detective Sullivan bounced briskly out of it. Eddie Marcus, however, remained in the Ford, and kept the motor running.

Soon another man appeared from the crowd at the station entrance, crossed quickly to the Buick, and got in. Detective Sullivan appeared, too, and got back into the Ford. At the same instant a sleek new Chevy pulled out of 32nd Street against the light, and with the Chevy first, the Buick second, and the Ford third they all headed downtown.

On a street in the West Twenties the Buick turned off after the Chevy had passed the intersection, but Eddie Marcus put on speed, cut around a truck, and also turned off. Detective Sullivan, meanwhile, busied himself with the car phone, and so at Ninth Avenue, when the Buick pulled over beside a fireplug, the Ford double parked a little way down the block, and Eddie Marcus and Sullivan got out.

There was a slip of paper in Sullivan's hand, and he looked down at it as if consulting an address. At the same time Doolittle and McCoy, from the Chevy, came around the corner, and walked toward the Buick from the other direction.

They all met beside the Buick. There Sullivan and Marcus moved around to the driver, and Doolittle and McCoy posted themselves by the passenger. There was no obvious excitement. Sullivan yanked open the door on his side, and the other two men yanked open the door on their side.

"Police officers," Eddie Marcus announced curtly. "Out of that car now, and watch your hands. Come on, come on. Start moving."

"What's the matter?" Romeo's boy said, apparently not understanding. "We weren't parked by this plug. We were just waiting for a minute, to pick up a guy."

"Then you can pick him up out here on the walk," Sullivan ordered. "And leave that package right there on the seat, mister. Out!"

"Okay, okay," Romeo's boy said. "Give me a chance, will you?"

They frisked him against the car, but there was no gun. After making sure, Sullivan reached into the car and drew out a gray

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overnight bag from the passenger's side, and a glass coffee jar wrapped in a brown paper bag from the driver's side. Neatly stacked in the overnight bag were new $20 bills, while the jar was filled with satiny white powder, which Eddie Marcus tasted with the tip of one finger.

"Some waiting for a friend," he remarked then to Sullivan. "But this doesn't belong to them, I guess. They won't even have any idea how it got in the car, Richie."

"Right," Romeo's boy grinned feebly. "I didn't bring that along, fellas, he did."

"Funny thing, though," Sullivan said. "You know what that powder looks like to me? Looks like pure heroin."

Romeo's boy was wearing a loose overcoat with floppy sleeves. Now, turning around in Sullivan's direction, his arm jerked, and that must have released a contraption between his elbow and wrist. He had both palms out to Sullivan as if in honestly puzzled appeal, but suddenly, in his right palm, he was holding a snubnosed revolver.

There was a flat tiny pop, hardly louder than that of a cap pistol. A split second afterward Eddie Marcus fired, and hit dead-center. Sullivan did not fire. Sullivan was foolishly surprised to find that he was down flat on the pavement. He tried to get up, and could not. He could not even reach out for the snubnosed revolver, which lay within inches of him. He could only lie there and look up stupidly at Eddie Marcus. He could not move his legs. He could not move his arms. From the shoulders down, in fact, Detective Sullivan found that he could not move even a finger. He was paralyzed.

And it was six months before he was up and around again. For Detective Sullivan, they were almost unendurable months. He had to be washed like a baby. He had to have everything done for him. After he was operated on, they put him in a plaster cast that covered him from neck to ankles, and that even had a bar between his legs to keep them motionless.

He could turn his head, he could move one arm feebly, and he could wiggle his toes. That was all. He could do nothing else but lie on his back, and stare up at the ceiling, as if encased all around in a giant's armor. Every two hours an indifferent nurse came into the room, and rolled him around from front to back, or from back to front. That was Detective Sullivan's day.

"And don't you complain about it, either," the neurosurgeon told

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him. "Thank your lucky stars, rather. The whole thing was touch and go for you. We had to take out the battered area of your spine and replace it with a sliver of shinbone–your own shinbone. Now you'll just have to stay in the cast until your spine knits up properly. Let me tell you that you're a damn lucky man. Just a fraction of an inch over, and that bullet would have paralyzed you for the rest of your life. Think about that a little, and stop complaining."

And there it was, six interminable months of it. He was washed; he was fed; and he was taken care of in every way. Meg came over in the beginning almost every night, but Sullivan never talked much to her. What was the use? His life was all done, or pretty well done, but hers was not. He was really not Detective Sullivan any more, despite the neurosurgeon's professed high hopes for him–he was Cripple Sullivan. Something had happened. And so a man faced what he was compelled to face, and he faced it all by himself. No big deal. Happened all the time. So long, Meg. No more fun and games with old Richie.

During that period, too, Sullivan had bad, even terrifying dreams. He would dream that the bullet had gone into him a little bit more to the left, and he could see himself paralyzed for the rest of his life. A crummy nursing home somewhere or other; a lazy and unconcerned attendant responding to his ring when it suited; and no one to visit him, no one to care. He would wake several times a night in anguished icy sweat, and in the bitter hours before dawn lay breathing heavily, both eyes squeezed shut and his lips working and twitching. It could have happened that way. It could still, if the doctor was lying to him, and things were not going so well as he had been told. Who knew? Who could say? God Almighty!

But he did not tell anyone about those dreams, not even Meg. More and more often, though, he found himself sick with fear, and for the first time in his life he knew what it felt like to be afraid. He had to fight something now which had never been necessary before, and he could not fight it. He had never learned how. Meg had known what she was talking about, all right. A man did need something else in himself, whatever it was, and Sullivan did not have it.

When everyone in the world was an enemy, you knew what to do about it. You became an enemy yourself. You fought back and made damned sure to get the better of it. But here and now was something that Detective Sullivan could not fight. The whole thing was out of his hands. And there was nothing in him–no hope or faith, no person

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or thing greater and more important than himself–for which he could reach out.

So a very bad six months, indeed–but they ended just fine. He was still weak as a kitten when they finally took the cast off, and at first, with a husky male nurse supporting him, he could only wobble from his bed to the room door. One day, too, both legs gave way under him, and when the attendant had to hoist him back into bed, he saw Meg standing at the window with her back turned. Then she ran out into the hall, and when she did he could see the rush of tears in her eyes.

He was ready for her when she came back, though. He had a cigarette going, and was looking up very stolidly at the ceiling.

"I don't want you to keep coming around like this all the time," Detective Sullivan told her. "There's no point any more, Meg. Hell with it. You can see what I am, and what I'll probably always be. Use your head, will you? Write me off."

"Yes, of course," she said, smiling just a little too brightly. "I'm going to walk out on you now when you need me for the first time in your life. Is that the kind you think I am, Richie?"

But the savage pride in Sullivan made his lips curl.

"I think you're the same as anybody else," he said harshly. "Which means, if you tie yourself down here to a damn cripple, in six months you'll wind up hating my guts. And I don't want that from you, Meg–or from anybody. I won't take it. Just leave me alone."

"You stop that talk," Meg whispered, her voice shaking. "And you stop it right now, Richie Sullivan. You're going to get better, and I'm going to marry you. We'll have a good life together, a fine life. So don't–"

"Won't you ever learn?" Detective Sullivan grated, with the thing started now, and nothing to do but finish it–and finish it, if need be, in the cruelest and most complete manner possible. "Let me tell you something. I never loved you, Meg, and I never will. I wanted you, sure. You're a damn good-looking girl. But anything else just wasn't in my head. So don't kid yourself. And so far as I'm concerned–well, there's a lot of good-looking girls around. I'll do just fine. There was nothing at all serious between us the way I look back at it. You got your own life to worry about, not mine. You don't owe me a damn thing."

Which ended Meg for him. After that, when she called him on the phone, he refused to answer, and when she came to visit him, he refused to talk. But the surprising thing was that, as the doctor had

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said he would, he did recover little by little. Soon he was graduated to a wheelchair which he could push around with his hands on the big wheels; then to a cane; and one fine October day they sent him on, for intensive physical therapy, to a suburban rehabilitation center. People on canes there, people in wheelchairs, people guiding themselves around in electric carts–and Detective Sullivan one of them.

They gave him a rubber wedge to squeeze hundreds of times a day in his left hand–the affected side–and when he was not doing that he kicked up his left leg hundreds of times, as high as he could, or worked his left ankle around in circles, and endlessly wriggled the toes on his left foot. It was slow work, very slow, but soon he could walk all the way to the dining room with his cane, and by the end of his second week all the way down there without it. One beautiful October day they even encouraged him to walk all over the grounds, wherever he wanted to, and often on those strolls he came across a couple he did not like very much, a Mr. and Mrs. Dally.

Mr. Dally was about 70 years old, and had suffered a severe stroke. Mrs. Dally was a frail little old woman with a withered face and bad eyes, so repulsive to Sullivan that he avoided looking at her. But on fine days she would wheel Mr. Dally around in his chair, and out in the garden hold hands with him in a warm sunny spot under the wall.

Mr. Dally had been a clerk in some Wall Street brokerage house all his life, and his respect and admiration for a man like Detective Sullivan was rather irritating. What the hell were the two of them living for, Detective Sullivan often asked himself. Damned good thing if a thug with a machinegun came into the center one night and got rid of everyone around, the Dallys and Detective Sullivan included. Save a lot of trouble that way. Best way out. Because to think of him ending up like the Dallys–

One day when he was sitting on a bench outside, they joined him–there was no escape possible–and Mr. Dally wanted to hear more of his experiences in the department. He was much impressed when Detective Sullivan admitted that he had once flattened a notorious Mob captain in Madison Square Garden, for a cutting remark about cops the Mob captain had made, and then dumped him head first into the nearest trash can. But, Mr. Dally inquired timidly, hadn't he been afraid of what might happen afterward? Mr. Dally would have been.

"Chance you take." Detective Sullivan shrugged. "Every time you

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cross a street, every time you draw another breath, you're taking a chance, aren't you? What happens, happens, the way I figure. Why be afraid of it? I've never been afraid of anything in my life. Don't pay."

But that wasn't the strict truth, he had to admit privately–not any more. Sometimes even now, with things going so well, he had that dream of a paralyzed and helpless Sullivan, staring up at the ceiling day after day, able to think–but not able to move so much as his little finger. So suppose there was a next time for Detective Sullivan, and suppose then the bullet hit him just that precise fraction of an inch to the left?

He got up hurriedly, cringing from the thought. Not scared? Holy God–he was blind terrified. It could happen, all right–if he was stupid enough to risk a next time. No! Out and out insane, that would be. Even if he was ever passed as physically fit for duty again, as the doctor had promised, there were certain steps he could take to get himself retired on a full disability pension. He had heard somewhere that no doctor could cure or even diagnose a bad back, and in many cases could not say why or even if a man suffered almost total agony from it. What then? Detective Sullivan would have to put on the act, that was all.

"I don't know, Doc," he could say, allowing an anguished contortion to twist up his mouth. "All I know is that I can't walk right, I can't sit down right, and I can't lie in bed right. Whatever I try, it just hurts like plain hell. Can't you do something?"

Which would serve. Then x-rays, of course, and consultations, and finally, on the doctors' part, absolute surrender. Yes, simple enough. Next time was out, definitely. Sullivan, and no one else, now had to look out, in any way he could, for Number One. So . . .

He prepared the ground with great cunning. He hobbled more and not less, and complained of savage and almost constant pain during his weekly examinations. Often, when a doctor was around, he rested his head against a corridor wall as if in physical torment, and one examination time he pretended that he could not get up on the table by himself, and made the doctor help him.

"Can't understand it," Dr. Silver had to admit finally. "Thought I had you patched up neat as a pin, Sullivan–and now this. I simply can't understand what's causing it. I'd have bet my right arm that you'd have been fit for duty again before Christmas. You were coming along just fine."

Twice Meg came to see him at the Rehabilitation Center, but

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Sullivan never offered her anything–and the twice was all. Better for her that way, and better for him, too. No silly blubbering about it, and no unwanted pity. Sullivan alone. How else could it be?

Which was another thing that annoyed him about the Dallys. They didn't seem to feel that way at all. The old woman came every afternoon, rain or shine, and Detective Sullivan could only wonder grimly what the hell they ever found to talk about–a withered old crone like her and a crippled old basket case like him. What in the world could they ever see in each other? Detective Sullivan could not understand that. It made him sick, and on another golden October day when he saw them waiting for him in a corner of the grounds, he turned off onto another path, pretending he had not seen Mr. Dally's feeble hand wave.

She had one arm around him, and was patting his shoulder in a loving and gentle manner. Dally just sat there with his head shaking and shaking, and held her free hand. From a different period of time, Detective Sullivan thought rather contemptuously; other loyalties for them which he would never understand, and did not care to. For richer or poorer, in sickness and health, till death do us part–what crazy nonsense when you bothered to think about it. Who else but two worn-out old crocks like them could even think about such promises?

He paused, lighting a cigarette to get them out of his mind, and heard the first police siren. It seemed to be several blocks down by a branch bank, and as he turned his head in that direction Detective Sullivan saw another car racing into the hospital grounds through the service entrance. There was a sudden desperate squeal of brakes as it came near the Dallys, and a man jumped out, holding a gun in his right hand, even before the car stopped.

The man vaulted over the garden wall, and the driver followed him. Both of them wore stocking masks, and the driver was lugging a well-filled paper bag. Even while running forward, they both looked back at the garden wall, and when they came to the Dallys the one with the weapon yanked the old lady up and around in front of him. Mr. Dally, making an attempt to pull her back, was knocked out of his chair to the ground, and then kicked brutally. Then the one with the bag spotted Sullivan standing there, and ran over to him, also drawing a pistol.

"You," he said, grabbing Sullivan by the throat, and smashing his head against a big oak. "See that parking lot there? You're going to go over to it and get us a car. I don't care what the hell kind it

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is, but you're getting it. So move over there, don't talk to anybody, and don't signal to anybody. Take the first car that has keys in it and drive it back of that little shed for us. If you don't–and I'll be watching you every step of the way–you'll get the back of your head blown off. Now move!"

And Detective Sullivan did move. He would have been altogether stupid not to. It was necessary to remember that fraction of an inch, after all, and he felt a sudden icy tremor all the way through him when the pistol was smashed into his stomach by way of emphasis.

"Whatever you say," he heard himself mumble jerkily. "Whatever you tell me, Jack."

The one with the old lady, at the same time, was pushing her ahead toward the tool shed, and Mr. Dally, trying to get up from the path, was not able to manage it. Twice he reached his knees, and twice he rolled over on them helplessly. "Emily, Emily!" he was crying. It must have been the wife's name. But she had been pushed into the tool shed now, with the man, and Detective Sullivan could see Mr. Dally beginning to weep.

The parking lot was not far away, and every step he took, Detective Sullivan could feel that gun held dead-center on his unprotected spine. A vegetable for the rest of his days, he was thinking dazedly–but no, no. He wasn't crazy. Afraid? He could feel sweat on his forehead, and an odd choking effect of tightness in his chest. So he hobbled on hurriedly for the parking lot, and on the end of the nearest line was his car.

Eddie Marcus had driven it up and left it there, and Sullivan had the keys in his coat pocket. So he knew what he had to do; no problem at all. Only old Mr. Dally could be seen now. The other two men and Mrs. Dally were inside the tool shed. And–what the hell?–the silly old man was trying to crawl in that direction. It must have been a colossal effort for him. He had to pull himself with his good leg and his good arm, rest a moment, then pull himself again. But he kept on, and Detective Sullivan could see the blind tears on his face.

"Emily! Emily!"

Detective Sullivan got in and started his car, still sweating. The only thing he decided to risk, in order to protect himself, was to unlock the glove compartment and slip out his big service revolver. Not that he intended to use it–he was not that foolish. Two against one? No, no. Just in case, maybe; if he had to, no way else. But that damned old fool of a Mr. Dally, no sense at all, was still crying and

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still dragging himself inch by inch toward the tool shed. Why? How the hell did he think he could help?

Detective Sullivan felt a blind hatred for Dally take over. Why didn't he stop? What did he think he could do to protect her? Detective Sullivan knew what–nothing at all. But still, with that agonizing forward effort, he crawled and crawled; still he kept saying her name; and Detective Sullivan could still see the tears on his face.

"All right," Dally was calling to her. "It's all right, Emily, I'm coming."

One of the men darted out of the shed, kicked Dally in the side of the head, and kicked him again. Dally lay still after that, and Detective Sullivan was beckoned with a savage wave of the gun. But Detective Sullivan was a lot smarter than Dally. Wetting his lips, running one hand nervously down the side of his leg, he stopped his car by the shed and got out.

The two men appeared, pushing Mrs. Dally between them. Of course, Detective Sullivan understood: hostage. They ran by Dally, and with an incredible effort Dally managed to grab at one of their legs. He was not able to hold on for long, just for a split second, and yet, for whatever reason, it was long enough for something to explode suddenly and beyond any control in Detective Sullivan.

He grabbed his police revolver off the seat, shamed and savage, cursing and in a wild boiling rage–a rage directed not at the Dallys or even at the two thugs, but at himself. He dropped the fellow holding the paper bag with his first shot. The other man yelled something, dropped his gun, and threw up both arms.

It was all over. But Detective Sullivan found himself shaking like a young aspen in a high wind. He was crouched a little, and scared sick. But he had done it, he thought numbly. He had not intended to, but he had. Why?

He did not know. But he found his voice to be steady enough when, after a moment or two, he decided to use it.

"Right there," he ordered the other man. "Right where you are, mister. Take it easy now. You won't have to wait hardly at all."

An hour or so later, after the necessary formalities were all taken care of, he phoned Meg. He was thinking of Mr. Dally crawling and crawling with such desperate and futile effort–but still crawling–the damned old fool–and he was also thinking of something which he had never believed in before.

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"Am I coming up tonight?" Meg repeated, obviously a bit flustered. "Well, of course, Richie–if you really want me to. Do you? But I thought–"

"And wear that gold dress you have," Detective Sullivan ordered. "I'm going to ask you something important, Meg."

"Oh?" And her voice hovered around that very nicely indeed. "You're pretty mysterious, aren't you? What is it?"

"That something you were talking about," Detective Richie Sullivan said. "So be here. Seven o'clock sharp, Meg. I think I understand now."

DETECTIVERSE

PRECISION ENGINEERING

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

The railroad car had millions in it.
We had the heist set to the minute.
Our timing—perfect. Our planning—great.
The caper failed; the train was late.

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Etta Revesz's first story, "Like a Terrible Scream," in the May 1976 issue of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, won the highest possible honor that a mystery short story can win. MWA (Mystery Writers of America) awarded the story its coveted Edgar as the best new mystery short story published in American magazines and books during 1976.

We described Etta Revesz's first story as having "great emotional impact." Her second story adds a remarkable sensitivity of detail, observation, and mood . . .

DEVIL OVER YOUR SHOULDER

by ETTA REVESZ

The closet was dark. Dark and alive with unknown things. Elly sat cross-legged. Her knees slapped against the cold parquet floor as she rocked slightly. A noise thumped in her ears . . .drum-pump . . . drum-pump . . . drum-pump. It pounded. Loud, louder. She folded her arms across her chest and hugged herself, afraid if her heart jumped out it might break! She counted the beats: une . . . deux . . . trois . . . four . . . five . . . six. Six! That's how old she was—six.

The blackness crowded. It leaned on her, heavy and thick. Elly knew if she tried she could bite off a chunk. She wondered if darkness had a taste, like the chocolate milk at kindergarten. Sometimes Elly and the other children blew bubbles into their glasses through the waxy straws, then Mademoiselle scolded in very fast French words. Elly didn't always understand the words. It was Mademoiselle's eyes and the way she clapped her hands—like little bird-wings flying—that showed she was angry. Elly learned a long time ago to watch people's eyes to tell what they meant, not their words. Words bounced, like a ball when you threw it downstairs. Words,

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like balls, grew smaller and smaller and finally disappeared. Eyes stayed.

The dark was so dark. To shut it out, Elly squeezed her eyes shut into her own darkness. It was so quiet. She listened to the stillness. It buzzed like a fly in a jar.

Was he out there? Waiting? Waiting for her to cry? Beg? Maybe even say she was sorry? Well, she wouldn't! They couldn't make her! Not Uncle Karl, or Aunt Charlotte, or Grandmère. Or even Mama! And certainly not Uncle Stefan! There in the gold silk-walled music room they poked angry eyes at her. Eyes that didn't fit the soft, sad words about her being bad. Elly didn't feel bad. Yet they all agreed she was, and let Uncle Stefan walk her up two flights of stairs to her Mama's room and lock her in this dark closet-box.

Hot. It was hot.

Hair stuck to her face where the fuzzy ends of her pigtails unraveled. She picked it off with pinchy fingers. She was so hot! The place under her knees felt sweaty. It was those ugly high brown stockings. None of the other little girls in kindergarten wore them, only she. Elly and Grandmère had a fight about them. Grandmère won.

"The cold will snap your bones and long hair will grow on your legs. Like a monkey."

Elly thought being a monkey might be fun. The organ grinder's monkey acted like he was happy, grabbing pennies and tipping his red velvet cap.

"The winter of 1927 will break all New York records, you wait and see!" Grandmère buttoned the stockings onto Elly's garter belt, and then laced up the gray suede high-topped shoes with the double leather toes in black patent leather. Elly hated them. It was so hard to skip as she walked beside Grandmère along Riverside Drive to her kindergarten every morning and back every afternoon.

Her legs felt stiff. Elly stretched them into another position. Tingly pinpricks ached for a minute. Then she heard it—the scraping sound of feet moving. The shoes squeaked on the polished floor before they reached the thick carpet in her Mama's room. For a moment, just one teeny second, Elly wanted to cry, to call out. But it was too late. She heard the door to the hall click shut. Uncle Stefan was gone.

It was very hot. Gluey.

Elly stuck out her lower lip and puffed upward to send wind onto her face. It didn't help. Next she sucked in a deep mouthful of air which made her dizzy, so she grabbed into the dark for something

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to hold onto. Cloth bunched under her fingers and tumbled over her head, half smothering her. The sweet perfume smell told Elly it was one of Mama's dresses, maybe even one she wore when she sang, all covered with shiny beads like a Christmas tree.

She was choking, she couldn't breathe. Elly clawed the dress off and squirmed free. It folded into a cloth puddle next to her, so she patted it into a pillow and sat on it. She pretended it was her Mama's lap and it helped Elly feel safe, not so scared. She dared open her eyes again.

She saw it.

Under the space between the door and the floor was a thin white line. It was pale, like the winter sunlight from the windows that looked out on Riverside Drive, across the park and past the railroad tracks that edged the river beyond. Lots of times at night, half asleep, Elly heard the puff-puff whistles of the trains.

She leaned forward and traced her fingers along the crack. The light was like a promise—a promise that they would let her out. All she had to do was watch that thin white line, and when it was gone, she would be free.

Elly began to hum. She knew lots of the songs her Mama sang. Her favorite song was the one Mama sang the time Grandmère took her to the elegant place with the high gold ceiling and big orchestra. Elly had sat very still in her best dress with the lace collar and the blue ribbons on her pigtails. Mama looked like a doll on the big stage. She wore funny clothes and a shiny black wig and walked in little squinty steps. When it was over, everyone clapped for a long time and Elly was very proud. Later, as they were leaving, Elly heard a man say to the lady with him, "Wonderful performance! Best Madame Butterfly the Met has put on in years!"

Madame Butterfly! What a lovely name, Elly thought. A name like sunshine and soft wind and floating flowers. She wished her name was Madame Butterfly, instead of plain Elly.

After that day, whenever she could, Elly would sneak into the Music Room and sit under the big piano with the silk fringed shawl that almost hid her. Very still she would sit as Uncle Karl played the music her Mama sang over and over. Uncle Karl was Mama's brother just like Uncle Stefan was, and Aunt Charlotte was Mama's sister. Sometimes Elly wondered if the whole world had brothers and sisters except her. Aunt Charlotte played the violin and often Mama sat in one of the velvet chairs with her eyes closed and listened as Aunt Charlotte's fingers acted like little hammers on the

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strings and her bow seesawed over them. It was like taking turns at making music and Elly thought that was nice. She hoped some day it would be her turn, so at night when she lay in her bed she'd practise the melodies that surrounded her days.

She hummed the song now and tried out the words she remembered.

"One fine day . . . " She skipped over some of them until she came to her favorite line. ". . . he'll call Butterfly . . . my little Orange Blossom."

Elly wished she was someone's orange blossom. Instead, Uncle Stefan called her a Big Liar. But she wasn't. She had told the truth. Elly stopped singing. She wanted to cry a little, but didn't. She remembered that day.

It was the day Max and Maria left. Elly liked Max. He let her follow him as he cleaned the house, and he blew balloons up for her and winked at her when he served at the table. Then he wore a white coat and little black tie and when he came to her chair, he leaned way over so she could help herself. That's when he winked at her. No one else ever winked at her. Maria, who was their cook and also did the ironing, was soft and folded floppy, like Elly's ragdoll, but Maria never winked at anyone.

Elly knew why Max and Maria were sent away. She had heard the loud voices from the library. First Uncle Karl, then Max, then Mama's upset words about finding her jewelry gone. Max's words were the loudest.

"Madame," Max said, "Please, you must believe me. I never touched . . . never took anything."

"But there was no one else in the house—except the family!" Uncle Stefan's voice was pleasant. "If it wasn't you in Madame Clara's room who took the diamonds, who could it have been?"

Clara was Mama's name and Elly knew who was in Mama's room, who took Mama's pretty things. It was Uncle Stefan. Elly had seen him put them in his pocket. She wondered if he had forgotten.

Later, after Max and Maria went up to their room on the top floor to pack, Elly heard Uncle Karl and Uncle Stefan come into the living room. They didn't notice her off to one side, behind the Chinese red sofa, drawing in her coloring book.

"It will have to be reported," Uncle Karl said.

"Naturally. The insurance company can handle that aggravation—after they pay off on the policy," Uncle Stefan said.

"But what about Max? The police might want to question him, as

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well as the insurance company, and if he and Maria are gone—" Uncle Karl was older than Uncle Stefan and his thin nose matched the thin hair on his head.

"Karl, stop your worrying! Who cares? Clara's insured. She'll get the money and can replace everything. Besides, there could be ugly publicity, even over a petty episode like this," Uncle Stefan argued.

Uncle Karl sounded tired. "But I don't understand. Max has been with us for three years. Why now, all of a sudden, should he steal Clara's diamonds?"

"The criminal mind is very devious." Uncle Stefan sounded half angry. "Let it rest, Karl. Unless you want unpleasantness." He stopped, then whispered. "The family must stick together."

Elly wondered why Uncle Stefan wanted the family to stick together. She pictured what they would look like smeared with paste, the kind they glued the colored paper chains together with for the school Christmas tree decorations.

After Uncle Karl left the room, Elly crawled around the sofa and stood up. She didn't expect the angry way Uncle Stefan looked at her. She watched as he dug his hands into his dark wavy hair and then patted it smooth again. Sometimes Elly loved him so much—when he laughed or danced around or did magic tricks with pennies or with cards. Uncle Stefan played cards a lot. Elly heard Grandmère cry and scold about his card-playing and once two nasty men came and Elly heard rough voices. Later Uncle Stefan and Uncle Karl shouted at each other. It frightened Elly when she saw Uncle Stefan's face, like now. Yet she wanted to help.

"Uncle Stefan," Elly began. "It wasn't Max. Don't you remember?"

"Remember? Remember what?" He reached for the white handkerchief in his coat pocket and wiped his forehead.

"When you were in Mama's room?"

"Of course. I got Clara's coat for her."

"No. Not that time." Elly felt important that he paid attention to what she said. "Not the time you got Mama's fur coat. I mean the time you put Mama's pretty things in your pocket. Remember?"

"Elly, you're a silly child. That wasn't me, that was Max."

"No, no! It *was* you! I saw you!"

"Liar! Little girls shouldn't lie!" He leaned over and put his face very close to hers. His mouth smiled but his eyes stared hard at her. Elly stared back, suddenly afraid of her uncle. He grabbed her arms and pressed his fingers hard into her until it hurt.

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"Elly, if you don't stop telling lies, some day when you look into a mirror you'll see the devil over your shoulder, and he'll take you away!"

Elly started to remind Uncle Stefan that she hardly ever looked in the many gold-framed mirrors because she wasn't tall enough, when he suddenly shoved her away. Elly fell against a carved chair. She heard his footsteps run down the stairs. She waited, then picked herself up. Her heart pounded. How did the devil look? And if he did look over her shoulder, could she stop him from taking her away? But she knew she didn't lie. It wasn't Max. It *was* Uncle Stefan. She felt sorry he didn't remember.

That evening Elly sat on the top stairs and watched as Max and Maria struggled down with their suitcases. She wanted to say something or wave, but Max had an angry face and Maria's was all red . . .

Her back ached from sitting all hunched up in the closet. She pushed herself backward until sharp edges poked into her. Boxes! She bumped into the boxes Mama hid in her closet. All tied up with ribbons, Elly knew they were the Christmas presents that grownups gave to each other. She knew hers came from Santa Claus. Elly was so excited about Christmas. That's really why she was locked in the closet. It was because of the present she made for Mama.

Yesterday on the way home from kindergarten with Grandmère, they passed the park. There, in the middle, was the most beautiful thing Elly had ever seen—so beautiful she was afraid it might disappear like lovely things in a dream you could never keep after you woke up. All colors of shiny balls, some even as big as balloons, and silver ropes criss-crossed the wavy green branches of the tree that reached way up high and looked like a paper cutout against the winter gray sky. And the lights! Like friendly eyes, all smiling and twinkling and winking at her! Right then Elly decided she could draw a picture of the glorious tree. It would be Elly's Christmas present for Mama!

Today there was no school. It was Saturday. She started early in the morning to find a large clean piece of paper to draw on. First she went down the back stairs to the kitchen. Grandmère sat at the white enameled table making out a shopping list.

"Can I have some paper?" Elly pointed to the pad her grandmother was writing on.

"Stop hopping up and down," Grandmère said. "You'll dig your own grave that way!"

"Can I!" Elly repeated.

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"No. Take a paper bag. That's good enough for you to scribble on."

"I want a nice piece of paper," Elly said.

"Little girls take what they get and are satisfied."

Elly ran to the back stairs and played she was a puppy. With her hands and feet she padded up the steps. She passed by the living room and the paneled dining room on her way up. As she reached Uncle Karl's and Uncle Stefan's bedroom, she peeped in through the half-open door. Uncle Stefan was still sleeping. She backed away. Down the hall was the library and from it Elly heard Aunt Charlotte practising. She stopped a minute and listened. Sometimes the skipping notes reminded her of raindrops splashing in a puddle, so fast and so many.

Elly loved listening to Aunt Charlotte play the violin almost as much as hearing Mama sing. Sometimes she was allowed into the library to lie flat on her stomach on the green velvet window-seat cushions. She had learned to be very still in this house where music ruled. Once Aunt Charlotte let Elly wrap the precious violin in its blue silk scarf and place it gently into the violin case that was all soft inside. Elly often wished she were the violin, because Aunt Charlotte loved it so much.

The library door opened as Elly pushed against it. Aunt Charlotte didn't notice her. Her mouth was a thin line. She kept tapping her toe in time to the notes she played over and over again. Elly watched her eyes. They looked far away and said "Don't bother me" silently. Elly spoke loudly.

"I want a piece of paper."

The music skidded to a squeaky stop. Her aunt looked up as if she didn't understand.

"I want to make a picture," Elly added.

"Fine. Go ahead." Her aunt smiled, the violin tucked under her chin again.

"But I have no paper," Elly said. "I asked Grandmère for some and I looked everyplace." Didn't anyone understand how important it was that she find paper so she could draw that glorious tree for Mama?

"Look in the Music Room. On the piano is a tablet," her aunt said.

Surely her Aunt knew she wasn't allowed in the Music Room any more. Not after the day she spilt a glass of milk on the pale yellow carpet and it made dark wet spots. The day when all the company came. Elly had wanted to die! She had run to Mama and buried her head in Mama's lap, so ashamed! Mama was angry because Elly's

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tears made a gooey spot on her pretty dress. She was told then never, never to go into the Music Room again!

That night Elly cried in her bed. The Music Room was the best place to be near Mama. Often Mama went away for days to sing in other places. Even tonight she was going away. Elly had seen her bags all packed and waiting in the hall by the front door. Elly was suddenly afraid she wouldn't get to kiss Mama goodbye locked up in this closet. But she knew Mama would come, would not forget, even if she was angry at Elly.

Elly had repeated, just to make sure she had heard her aunt correctly, "The piano in the Music Room?"

But her aunt had already lifted the bow and the skipping notes had begun again. Elly was forgotten.

Softly she closed the library door and went hand over hand on the banister down another flight of steps to the Music Room. The sliding doors were parted and Elly peeped in. The room was empty. Carefully she tiptoed over the yellow carpet to the piano. There were several piles of music and Elly lifted some off. The tablet was not there. Then she saw it! The top page of the music had a picture of a lady in a shiny black wig, dressed in the same funny clothes Mama wore on the stage that day when people called her Madame Butterfly. Suddenly Elly knew what she would do. She would make the glorious tree right on Mama's song!

Elly ran back to her toy box and got her crayons. Safely concealed under the piano by the shawl, Elly spilled out the colors. She worked very hard. When the last bright ball was colored in, Elly sat back to admire her picture. It was beautiful! Mama would surely love it! It was then she decided to make another tree on another page of the music . . . and another . . .and still more! That way, whenever Mama sang her song, she would see the Christmas tree and think of Elly.

They found her under the piano with some of the broken crayons pressed into polkadots of color on the pale yellow carpet. It was Uncle Karl who came in first and then called in the others. They stood around her, all brothers and sisters, with their mother, Grandmère. Silently they stared. Their eyes pointed like long fingers—as if she was a bug, a nasty bug, and they wanted to squash her. Elly promised herself she would never, never hurt a bug, not even a spider.

Finally they called her. They made her crawl out from under the piano. The fringe tickled her as it touched her neck. All of them talked to her at once. They stabbed her with little sharp words that

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almost made her cry. But she held back the tears. She knew that when Mama saw the glorious Christmas trees she drew, Mama would hug and kiss her. But Mama didn't. She looked with soft sadness and turned away from Elly.

"How could you? On my new score of 'Butterfly.' " Mama looked miserable. "Oh, how could you?"

"But I looked everywhere for paper. I asked everyone! I did! I did!" Elly said.

"But you were forbidden to come into the Music Room." Uncle Karl turned his face away as he spoke.

Elly looked at her aunt before she answered. "But Aunt Charlotte said I could—she told me I could come in!"

Why didn't her aunt say something? Let them know she had asked? Instead, her aunt smiled sadly as if she never said it, as if she didn't remember!

"Liar!"

The word cracked like thunder. Again it snapped out of Uncle Stefan's mouth. His teeth looked like piano keys, all in a row, white and square.

"Liar! Your child is turning out to be a dangerous liar!"

"Lying and being disobedient are terrible things for a child to do," Grandmère said. "She must be punished!"

That's when they let Uncle Stefan lock her in the dark closet. To teach her a lesson, they said. Before she could come out, she would have to say she was sorry and admit she was bad . . .

The air in the closet smelled of Mama's leather shoes and the perfume from her clothes made Elly's head ache. She gulped in air but it burned like hot soup all the way down. It hurt. She reached along the floor and her hand touched something soft. Mama's slipper! The furry one that reminded Elly of a rabbit. She wiggled her fingers into the toe. It felt warm. Warm and soft. She hugged the slipper to her chest and rocked it back and forth like her doll.

The dark was very still and heavy on her head. Elly turned toward the door. The line! The white line was gone! That meant they would come and let her out! She just knew it! She hoped they would hurry. It must be near dinnertime and she was so hungry and thirsty.

She heard it! A tiny click of the door opening and then footsteps coming across the floor. Another click and now light showed through the crack under the closet door. Elly dropped the slipper. She struggled to her knees, bumping them.

Now! Now the door would open!

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The footsteps stopped in front of the door.

Elly waited. She kept her eyes on the white line. What was taking so long? Suddenly the light started going away! It got paler, like words being erased. Elly reached down and walked her fingers along the crack. They touched something! Cloth!

Someone was stuffing the light away, making it all dark again. Dark and hot! She picked at the material, tried to grab a pinch and pull it out, but it was stuck. Now the white line was all gone.

She listened. Someone was still out there! She could hear feet moving away.

Elly stood up. She beat against the locked door and screamed . . . and screamed . . . and screamed. Her fists hurt and still she pounded. Her screams bounced back at her. Up and down, over and over, until her throat was raw. Then she stopped. Waited.

No one came.

Her hands slid down the door as she flopped onto the floor again. Her legs jackknifed beneath her. She reached for the furry slipper and cradled it in her arms. Her head felt hot, her face sticky-wet, and her mouth dry. She pulled in a swallow of air. Softly she began to sing again.

"One fine day . . ."

The air was thick. She sucked in another mouthful and continued, ". . . from out of the distance . . ."

Her eyes burned. Inside her chest was a rubber band squeezing, pulling, choking her. Elly struggled to remember the next words. ". . . he'll call Butterfly . . . my little Orange Blossom."

Mama *would* come. Come and call her "little Orange Blossom." She rocked the slipper very slowly. Things flew around in her head . . . like a pinwheel when the wind blew. From somewhere she heard Uncle Stefan's voice: "Liar! Liar!" it said.

Deep inside herself Elly called out, "No, no!" But no one heard. It was too late. She couldn't breathe. She closed her eyes and then shivered once. The furry slipper made a gentle plop as it fell out of Elly's arms.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

TIMOTHY CHILDS

Timothy Childs was born in Los Angeles in 1941, and is a fifth-generation Californian. But he and his wife, Terri, "have kept on the move, living in seven cities in four countries during the ten years of their marriage." Mr. Childs's first novel, COLD TURKEY, *was published in May 1979 by Harper & Row (a Joan Kahn book). . . .*

It is 1979, and there are nightmares that are peculiarly, perhaps uniquely, 1979. But in these violent days, nightmares have broken out of their former limits of time and darkness. Now there are daymares that are peculiarly, perhaps uniquely, 1979. Will the daymares persist past 1979? Or will they be caught, caged, and returned to their former time zone? . . .

IS ANYONE THERE?

by TIMOTHY CHILDS

My life is truly cursed.

I couldn't run, not in Beverly Hills, not in my last good suit. Eleven ten by my fine gold watch. Perspiration trickled down my back, sure to leave stains. Eighty-eight degrees on the day before Christmas. Ridiculous. I couldn't run. Running would have been so undignified.

Faster, pavement jarring my ankles until they felt like stumps. The sidewalk was choked with shoppers, their arms clutched around high-stacked Christmas packages. I glared them from my path. At the corners I kept stabbing at the pedestrian buttons, trying to make the traffic lights change faster.

Finally, the Slater Tower Building. Twenty stories high, dark windows, a plaza. A little fountain in the plaza. Workers were rushing out of the building, full of tiresome Christmas cheer, going home

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early to cook their Christmas turkeys. I couldn't afford a turkey sandwich, after six months without work. My fine gold watch said eleven fifteen. I would be twenty minutes late. My life is truly cursed.

Three snickering girls pushed past me into the elevator. One held a glass of eggnog that threatened to overflow on my fine leather briefcase. Drinking at that hour. Probably file clerks. They prattled all the way to the seventh floor, every word pulling at my neck muscles. As I left the elevator, the three clerks tittered. I swung around quickly to see if they were laughing at me. But the elevator doors had closed.

Down the hall. Two massive doors on which the words:

Suite 700
WARD & ARMSTRONG
Mortgage Brokers

were written in raised steel letters. I opened the door and entered, my excuses rehearsed.

Silence. No one there to hear my excuses. To the left of the waiting area were five secretarial desks, including one for the Receptionist; opposite was a row of offices, each with its door open; to my right, another row of offices, disappearing down a hallway.

No sign of life.

Three of the desks looked very orderly, as if their occupants had left for the Holiday, but the other two had papers on them. On and around them. A folder had fallen from the Receptionist's desk, strewing papers over the chair and the floor. The telephone receiver was off the hook, its dial tone changed to an angry, high-pitched alarm. A most unpleasant noise. I replaced the receiver and sat down in one of the waiting-room chairs.

Someone would surely come soon.

Silence. Only the gentle rush of the air conditioning and a tiny rattle from one of the entry doors. I could have walked off with the entire office, had I been a thief, which I am not. Highly inefficient. I was obviously needed to correct a few things at Ward & Armstrong.

I looked around at the offices: wood paneling, deep carpets, rich fixtures. Even the ashtray on the table next to me was impressive: heavy crystal. And walls covered with oil paintings. Of course, they could have been prints; these days it's so hard to tell the real from the fake.

Still no one came.

I noticed a scratch on my fine leather briefcase. Probably from the

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file clerks. I licked my finger and rubbed the scratch, making it less noticeable. Then I opened the briefcase and withdrew a résumé for Mr. Phelps. The résumé had been prepared by an executive-placement agency I had been foolish enough to retain. I was nearly an executive in several of my jobs. For an exorbitant fee the agency supplied me with 50 copies of the résumé–professionally prepared–and sent me on a dozen interviews, none of which resulted in a thing. I had wasted money and time. *Six months* of my time. Of my life! For nothing!

A deep breath. Crumple the shreds of a torn résumé into a ball and shove it between the seat cushion and the back of the chair. Another deep breath as the pounding slowed. I started to close my fine leather briefcase, then reached inside and let my fingers caress the raised letters of my specially designed bronze nameplate. *Edward T. Creary*. In bronze. How well it had looked on my desks, how well worth the expense. Even if the others had laughed behind my back.

With Mr. Phelps it would be different . . . I watched him read my résumé. His eyes met mine with respect.

"Mr. Creary, you are a master of many skills."

"I have had a certain success."

He calculated rapidly on a yellow legal pad, writing with a gold pen. I vowed to have such a pen. A pink tinge blushed his cheeks when he turned again to me.

"I can't offer to pay you what you're really worth, because that would unbalance our budget, but–" He had to swallow before continuing. Embarrassed. "But would thirty thousand a year seem insulting?" . . .

Still no one. From far below on the street came the faint scream of a siren. Strange to be so peaceful, there in the waiting room. Seven stories below, awaiting my return, was a jungle of traps and sirens.

But no one came. Only air rushing, a ticking, pecking rattle. Empty desks with papers strewn. It was beginning to get on my nerves. I remembered a movie I saw years ago about an atomic attack. New York looked the same as before, except all the people were gone. Newspapers blowing through the streets. It was a silly movie; there would have been bodies.

My fine gold watch said 35 minutes past eleven. Eleven thirty-five. Time to show some initiative. I stood up and walked to the hallway.

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No sign of life.

"Hello?" No answer. "Hello! Is anyone there?"

"I am here. Is someone there?" The half-heard voice seemed to come from a corner office.

"Yes! I have an appointment with Mr. Phelps! About a job!" I felt absurd, shouting out my business to someone I couldn't see. Very undignified.

He emerged from the corner office and strutted toward me, a little smile on his face. On his little face. He was 50, nearly bald, stubby.

"Mr. Phelps, you say. He is in the Board Room at the moment. Everyone is there; except me, of course." Seedy black suit, plain white shirt, narrow black tie. An outfit I might have owned 20 years ago. Not a good impression for an employee of Ward & Armstrong to make on their newest executive.

"I had an appointment for eleven. The traffic was impossible. I've been waiting here since ten after. No one came."

He peered up at me through thick wire-rimmed glasses. "Most of the staff are off today. It is the day before Christmas, you know. Everyone else is in the Board Room, except me. I'm the President, you know."

What luck, the President! "I'm honored to meet you, sir."

He shook my hand with his fingertips. "Why don't the two of us talk a little before you see Mr. Phelps."

I took my fine leather briefcase and started to follow him. "Someone left that phone lying off the hook, so I replaced it." Showing initiative.

"Ah, yes, thank you for putting it back. At times Miss Collins can be quite careless."

His office was grand. He sat in a high-backed leather chair, behind an antique desk. On its green leather surface stood an elegant bronze stallion, galloping. Next to it an ashtray, two telephones, and a triple pen set. I'd never seen a triple pen set. At the other end of the room, four chairs and a couch, grouped around a glass-topped coffee table.

I sat down. In front of me was a plastic nameplate: *Malcolm A. Dodge*. My bronze nameplate was far more impressive. I glanced at the leather-framed photograph of Mrs. Dodge. A lovely woman.

He coupled his fingers and slowly cracked the knuckles on both hands. Always the smile.

"You must have a résumé."

I took another copy from my fine leather briefcase and handed it

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across the desk. He read from the first page.

"Creary. Edward Terence Creary. Forty-two years old. With Consolidated Mortgage until, let's see, about six months ago." He pulled the triple pen set a few inches closer and looked critically at it. Then at me. "How did you happen to leave Consolidated?"

"A personality conflict." And it had been, with old Stafford, the Vice-President. He disagreed with my handling of Miss Branch, who wouldn't stop calling me Eddie. Perhaps it was a bit severe, striking her. But she'd been given plenty of warning. Discipline.

"Yes, yes, personality conflicts can occur. I understand that very well." Mr. Dodge had the distracting habit of clearing his throat as he talked. He reached over to shift the angle of the bronze stallion before turning back to the résumé. "You had been with Consolidated Mortgage, let's see, almost two years."

Two long years, and then to be discharged without a word of thanks. Thinking of it made my fists knot. Of all the injustices done me in my previous jobs that was the worst. Not a word of gratitude.

"You seem to have a broad background in the mortgage business, Mr. Creary. Would you describe yourself as being–what shall I say?–*loyal*; yes, loyal to your employers?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I consider loyalty to be most important."

"Loyalty is most important to me, Mr. Creary, especially just now." He'd gone suddenly pale. Tiny beads of perspiration popped out on his bald head. "You see, I have only become President of Ward and Armstrong today, just today. I must build a staff that is loyal to me."

I was quick to reassure him. "You can certainly count on me, Mr. Dodge. And may I offer my congratulations on your promotion."

He relaxed a bit. "Thank you, thank you. It was not easy, you know. There was considerable opposition to my advancement, despite my thirty-five years with the firm, but I convinced them in the end. In the final analysis, hard work . . ."

He rambled on. A queer man. On the telephone Mr. Phelps had said they needed an assistant loan officer. Fifteen thousand a year. An almost private office and secretary. Thinking of it made me miss some of what he had been saying.

". . . and so, I would want you to remember these things, should you decide to work for me."

My mind snapped back. "Oh, yes, sir. I will."

"Good, good. I think you will be a welcome addition to my staff." He clapped his hands and grinned with pleasure, exposing an un-

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even row of gray and yellow teeth. "You shall be my Vice-President, at an annual salary of, shall we agree, fifty thousand dollars?"

I was afraid he'd see my hands tremble. Vice-President! I'd never occupied so dignified a position. And $50,000 a year! My response was a weak stammer. "That's very generous. I promise you won't be sorry."

"I'm sure of it, I'm sure of it. Your office will be right next to mine. Now I must take you to meet the staff–those few who are here today, of course."

My feet floated above the thick carpet as he led me down the corridor.

At last the position that so long eluded me! We passed several private offices, the mail room, a small library, and a file room with banks of loan folders. Vice-President! At the end of the hall was a door with a sign on it: *Board Room*. Mr. Dodge opened the door for me to enter.

In the center of the Board Room was a long, gleaming conference table. Five leather chairs on each side of it, an eleventh at the head. On the table were two telephones and several of the heavy ashtrays. A notepad and pencil were carefully positioned at each chair.

Four of the staff were there. Three sat at the table. The fourth–a young woman–lay face down on the carpet, her arms stretched out toward the door. She must have been reaching for it when he shot her.

They were all dead.

My life is truly cursed.

I staggered back, colliding with Dodge, which made me recoil again. Lurching forward, I nearly tripped over the outstretched woman. A nightmarish stillness saturated the room, broken only by a strange, choked, whimpering noise. I looked wildly around to see if one of them could somehow be alive.

Then I realized the whimper was coming from me.

"Unswerving loyalty, Mr. Creary, unswerving loyalty." He held the pistol casually, not pointing it at anything in particular. Not yet.

Dodge cleared his throat with a harsh bark. "Staff, I want you to meet my new Vice-President, Mr. Edward Terence Creary." Then to me: "This is Miss Collins, nearest you, and that is Mrs. Melnick. Mr. Phelps, the gentleman you came to see, is over there. Mr. Ward is at the head of the table. Everyone else is off today. It is the day before Christmas, you know."

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I nodded at each corpse as he pointed at it, trying to speak, my throat packed with chalk. Mrs. Melnick and Mr. Phelps were slumped over the table. The girl on the floor was Miss Collins. Mr. Ward had his head thrown back and his arms spread wide apart. A bullet had pierced his forehead. He looked grotesque. The air stank of blood.

My knees were jelly.

"Some of the staff were adamant in their opposition to my promotion, but I convinced them." Dodge snarled toward the body at the head of the table. Mr. Ward had died with terror on his face. Dodge spoke to him–to it–sharply. "Ward, I want that proposed budget on my desk by three this afternoon. By three at the latest."

He twinkled at me in satisfaction as he gestured toward the door.

Somehow I obeyed.

I stumbled down the hall, away from the Board Room and its corpses, my brain beginning to clear. My only chance was to stay calm. At least the gun was gone from his hand. We stopped at his office while I got my briefcase, then he took me next door.

"This will be yours, Mr. Creary. I hope that it suits you?"

Under any other circumstances it would have suited me beyond my wildest dreams. Ultramodern aluminum desk, the kind with no drawers. Handsome. On the desk, one of those sculptures composed of plastic balls hanging from wires. Out the window, a fine view of Beverly Hills. Not as impressive as the President's office. But distinguished in every aspect.

The rise in my fortunes was monumental, even if it might only last a day.

"It's very handsome, Mr. Dodge. I hope the previous occupant won't object to my taking it."

"Object? Oh, no. This used to be the office of Mr. Phelps, and I've explained the situation fully to him."

I searched his face, but he seemed quite serious. Out of touch with reality. He pointed at the desk, to a small box.

"That is the intercom. If I buzz twice, that will mean for you to come to my office."

"Yes, sir. I understand."

He went on cheerfully. "The rest of the staff will remain in the Board Room, should you need to consult them. I'm afraid you will have to work through lunch today. There is so much to do. Yes, there will be no lunch today for either of us. And no sneaking out–I can see the hall clearly from my desk."

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His eyes instantly menaced. I had to pacify him. "Oh, no, Mr. Dodge. I'd never do that!"

"Fine, fine. Now I will leave you to get used to your new office."

As soon as he went out of the room I sat down in my new chair. Of course, it was actually Mr. Phelps's chair. Or Mr. Phelps's former chair. Anyway, it was covered in velvet. Deep blue. Beautiful. Under the desk was an electric buffer. I pressed the switch with my toe, setting the polisher in motion. In truth, my shoes needed a shine. I took a cigar from the lacquered box on the desk, clipped the end with the gold tool lying next to the box, and lit it with the matching gold lighter. A smooth flow of smoke began to sooth my nerves.

If only Edna could see me in this office. Edna, who never understood my destiny, who left when Fortune turned against me.

I took out my bronze nameplate and positioned it carefully on the desk. Then I noticed a dial on the side of the desk. I turned it on. Stereophonic music soared from hidden speakers. Wagner.

If only Edna could see me in this impressive office, a Vice-President at $50,000 a year. Getting a shoeshine and smoking an expensive cigar. Stereophonic Wagner. And only yesterday I'd considered selling my fine gold watch to buy groceries.

But, of course, this could never last.

Two short buzzes. I went next door to see Dodge.

He was standing behind the desk, rearranging a book shelf. "Oh, yes, Creary. We must discuss our plans for the new year. Sit down, sit down."

I sat down.

"Now, then. We have problems–small problems–with a few of our loans. They are decent people, but things have just not worked out well, for them or for us." He picked up a thick loan folder from the desk. "Look this over right away and let me know what you think. You may go now."

Not a very polite dismissal.

I took the folder back to my office and closed the door. My chair certainly was comfortable. Another siren passed on the street below. I turned up the music to block out such intrusions. In one of the desk drawers were some cards and a marking pen. I carefully wrote my new title on one of the cards. *Vice-President.* I leaned the card exactly against the center of my bronze nameplate. Until I could order a new one. Then I opened the folder and began to read.

Twenty minutes later I sat back in disgust. Dodge wasn't fit to be President. Of anything. He had approved a quarter-million-dollar

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loan on property that couldn't have been worth half that much. Sheer incompetence. *Malcolm A. Dodge, Assistant Vice-President.* Mr. Ward was probably going to fire him, so Dodge murdered everyone and made himself President. Assistant Vice-President to President in one day. Quite a promotion. For an incompetent.

I went to his office.

"Well? Well? What do you think, Creary?"

I tried to appear respectful. "It looks bad, to be frank. We'll simply have to foreclose, then sell the property for whatever we can get."

"Not very inspired advice, Creary! Perhaps I made a mistake with you!"

"I'm no good to the firm if I'm not honest."

His eyebrows were two black sponges, soaking up the perspiration that flowed into them. "Not very inspired at all for a fifty-thousand-a-year man!"

He was like all the rest–made a mistake and blamed me. Unreasonable. "I wasn't the one who approved this loan."

Dodge leaped out of the chair. His hand darted toward a coat pocket.

"Maybe things aren't as bad as they look! Must further consider the matter. Approach it a different way!" Words came from me in a gush, as if the force of their flow could stop his hand. "We can meet with the borrowers. Talk over the situation. It's not anyone's fault when conditions change." Dodge was obviously a lunatic; only a lunatic would make a loan like that. Obviously a dangerous, incompetent man. "Something can be worked out!"

Slowly he relaxed back into his chair. He withdrew the hand from his coat pocket. "Yes, that's it; yes, nobody's fault." He smiled, but weakly this time. More form than substance. "You are going to be all right, Eddie."

Why do people have to call me Eddie! Forty-two years old and still Eddie! I fought to retain my composure. "Thank you, Mr. Dodge. I hope I live up to your expectations."

"And you do, Eddie, you do. Go on back to your office now. We will talk about this later."

Eddie. When I got back to my desk I saw that the cigar had come apart in my hand. I lit another and turned up the music. So pleasant there, alone, without that lunatic. So safe. I had to think. Surely I could find a solution to my problem. Executive planning. A Vice-President could do that.

Facts. What were the facts. Dodge was an incompetent who'd

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murdered four people to become President. He was a threat to Ward & Armstrong. And to me. If I could overpower him and call the police, the Company would be grateful. I might even get a raise.

A tapping from behind me. Intruding on my thoughts. I turned around to see a man on a scaffold, outside the window peering in at me. A window washer. He tapped again, waved, smiled stupidly. Another drunk on the day before Christmas. I motioned for him to leave me alone. I had to think. He tapped again. Enough. I went to the window and threw the curtains shut. The tapping ceased.

Back at my desk. I might get a promotion or a raise. Perhaps both. I had to catch Dodge by surprise. Somehow. Then I knew how.

I entered his office without knocking. He had his head on his arms, slumped over the desk, as if asleep. He jerked as the door closed behind me.

"I didn't call for you, Eddie!"

"I've had an idea, sir. I wanted to show initiative."

He didn't seem pleased. "I see, yes."

I sat down in my customary chair. In front of me was the cheap nameplate. *Malcolm A. Dodge.* Malcolm. Malc. "Mr. Dodge, who is the Chairman of the Board of Ward and Armstrong?"

He considered a moment. "Why, I suppose Mr. Ward is still the Chairman. He held that position, as well as being President."

"But that's not right, sir." Malc. "You have shown decisive leadership. You should hold the highest place in the Company."

Annoyance became a beaming grin. "You know, Eddie, I absolutely agree. There is no place in this company for the likes of Ward." He clapped his hands in delight.

"Everyone is in the Board Room, Mr. Dodge." Malc. "We should go tell them."

Dodge sat back in the chair and chuckled to himself. "Chairman. Imagine the look on Ward's face. Very good, Eddie. You keep up the good work and I will make you my Senior Vice-President."

How dare he! I deserved at least Executive Vice-President! But I was in control now. Calm. "Why don't we go tell him right away?"

Dodge was already halfway to the door. "Yes, yes, they must be told immediately."

I followed him down the hall to the Board Room. He was still in the lead. For the moment. I nearly laughed aloud at this President–this incompetent–this incompetent President about to be deposed. A brief struggle, tie him up with my belt, call the police. Gratitude.

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We entered the Board Room.

"Mr. Dodge, look. Mr. Ward is still at the head of the table. This can't continue." I made myself speak to the corpse, trying not to see the crimson hole in his forehead. "Mr. Ward, you are no longer Chairman of the Board. You have been replaced. Mr. Dodge must sit in that chair."

Mr. Ward didn't budge. How could he? Being dead.

I stepped over the body of Miss Collins, gesturing for Dodge to follow me. "We'll have to move him forcibly."

"You are right, Eddie. We will move him together." He walked to the other side of Mr. Ward and bent over him.

My chance. I picked up one of the heavy crystal ashtrays. As he took Ward's arm, started to lift Ward by the arm, I hit Dodge on the back of the skull. Hard. He moaned, pitching forward onto Ward's body. Again the ashtray in my hand flashed. Dodge slid to the floor, moaning louder.

I pulled the pistol out of his coat pocket just as Dodge began to scream.

"Traitor! You would rise against me? You–"

"Incompetent! Not fit to be President!"

He was desperately trying to stand. I pointed the gun between his eyes and squeezed the trigger again and again. The pistol was empty. He was on his knees, shrieking.

"I made you Vice-President!"

"Incompetent!"

"After all your failures!"

"Shut up!"

"Judas! Arnold!"

"Malc, Malc, Malc, Malc!"

I threw the useless gun at him and it knocked him back to the floor. He pleaded with me then.

"Eddie, for God's sake, don't–"

But the heavy ashtray was in my hand once more and I was hitting him with it on the head of that fraudulent incompetent presidential head the crystal burning red my hands slipping on the blood and sweat from his dying presidential head until he stops screaming no danger to anyone ever again ever

Silence. Only the rush of air conditioning to calm my nerves as I lie next to Dodge. The dead Dodge. The dead President.

I have never felt so peaceful.

Finally I get up off the floor and wipe my hands on the front of

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his white shirt. I leave him there next to Mr. Ward. Two former Presidents.

Across the hall is the men's room. Carefully I wash my hands. Very carefully.

I walk down the hall past my old office to the office of the President. I take the plastic nameplate that reads *Malcolm A. Dodge* and drop it into the wastebasket. My bronze nameplate looks at home on a presidential desk.

I sit in the handsome leather chair. It is even more comfortable than my old velvet one. I reach slowly for the telephone.

But I don't dial.

Suddenly I need a cigar.

I go back to my old office and get the lacquered box of cigars, the gold clipper, and the gold lighter. I return and put them on my new desk. I light a fresh cigar and sit back. Satisfied.

Time passes, a lot of time, how much I cannot tell.

Then there is a voice. A faint voice. From the reception area.

"Is anyone there?" the voice asks.

"I am here," I answer. "Is someone there?"

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a *NEW* Henry-and-Ralph story by

JACK RITCHIE

The game's afoot again for our friends Henry and Ralph, the demon detectives of Milwaukee, who practice the Sherlockian method—keen observation of minutiae and sharp deductions therefrom. Henry Turnbuckle is a wiz at it—he definitely believes in the "more cerebral" processes of elimination and "the intricacies of the detective mind." Who would want it any other way? . . .

THE SLIVER OF EVIDENCE

by JACK RITCHIE

"Ah, ha," I said. "What have we here?" I bent down and lifted the toothpick from the floor.

"Careful, Henry," Ralph said. "You wouldn't want to smudge any fingerprints."

He was joshing, I suspected.

Ralph smiled on. "Or toothmarks. You know how there have been cases where burglars have been nailed to their crimes because they left behind toothmarks in apples."

I squinted in study. There were no toothmarks. "Ralph, this toothpick will send our murderer to the gallows, or its modern equivalent, which is twelve years and ten months, with good behavior."

The toothpick had come to light when the men from the coroner's office had removed the body. It had been under the victim's left knee and clear of the blood.

"I see it so clearly, Ralph. The murderer and his victim confront each other. As the murderer strikes, his lips curl, thereby losing control of the toothpick, and it falls to the floor unnoticed."

The victim's name was Victor Latimer, 58, single, and he had been the owner and proprietor of the Lakeside Hotel. He had been

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stabbed only once, but sufficiently so as to cause his immediate death. His wallet had been undisturbed and there were no fingerprints on the murder weapon, a bread slicer.

His body had been discovered by the hotel's chief cook, a Maggie Henderson, when she entered the kitchen for her duties at five o'clock that morning. It was now nearly 6:30 A.M.

"Henry," Ralph said. "What makes you think that the toothpick belonged to the killer? Why couldn't it have been Latimer's? Why couldn't it have fallen out of *his* mouth?"

I chuckled tolerantly. "Ralph, it is all a matter of observation and subsequent deduction. Did you get a good look at the corpse?"

"Sure."

"And did you not notice that the victim either had perfect teeth, or a full set of dentures?"

Ralph recollected. "At his age they would have to be dentures."

"Excellent. And is it not a fact, Ralph, that people with dentures do not *require* the services of toothpicks?"

Ralph was awed by the information. "Henry, you've opened up a whole new world."

Maggie Henderson was a rather sturdy woman who, though pale, evidently did not believe in idle hands under any circumstances. Either that or it was simply her reaction to stress. While the lab and the coroner's men had been busy, she had retired to a quiet corner of the large kitchen, whipped together a cinnamon-raisin coffee cake, and eased it into one of the ovens.

I approached her. "How many guests do you have in this hotel?"

"Twenty-eight. Only I don't suppose you would call it a hotel nowadays. We don't cater to transients. We have mostly middle-aged and elderly people who like the convenience of hotel living. We're booked solid and there are people on the outside who have been waiting years for an opening, which usually comes only when someone dies."

The Lakeview Hotel was a four-story structure in an older, semi-residential section of the city near the bluffs overlooking the lake.

"You discovered the body when you entered the kitchen this morning?"

"Yes."

"What time did you quit the previous evening?"

"Around eight. It's usually that late before everything's cleaned up. I do most of the cooking here, but not the serving or the dishwashing."

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I did some mathematics. "You put in a fifteen-hour day?"

"I take off a couple of hours after breakfast and lunch."

Still, it was a long day. "Last night, after eight, I presume there was no body on the floor when you left and went home?"

"I have a room on the fourth floor. I need to be here to start things off early in the morning."

According to the coroner's rule-of-thumb guess, Latimer had been dead for some time. It was the coroner's qualified opinion that death had occurred before ten last night.

"When you saw the body, did you touch anything?"

"Nothing. I just called the police."

"How long have you been working for Mr. Latimer?"

"Twenty-two years."

Ralph had been measuring the premises with his eyes. "Who gets the hotel now that Latimer's dead?"

She thought about that. "I guess that would be his brother. He's the only living relative Mr. Latimer had."

"And where is this brother now?"

"In the roominghouse next door."

I raised an eyebrow. "Next door? Why doesn't he room here?"

Maggie hesitated. "We're full up."

Obviously there was something else. I smiled grimly. "Is there something else?"

"Mr. Latimer and his brother didn't get along too well."

"Ah," I said, grasping the anomaly immediately. "If they did not get along too well, why does this mysterious brother choose to find a residence directly next door?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"Did Mr. Latimer have his quarters in this building?"

"He had a suite on the third floor."

"Why would he come down here to the kitchen after eight in the evening?"

"He likes to see that things are in order."

I began reconstructing the crime. "Latimer came down here after eight. Either the murderer was already in the kitchen or he entered later. A stranger? An intruder? No, I think not. There surely would have been some sign of a struggle had that been the case. But there was none. No, Latimer saw someone he knew. They quarreled. The murderer snatched up a knife and stabbed him. He then calmly wiped the fingerprints from the handle of the weapon and simply walked out. Yes, I am convinced that Latimer was killed by someone

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he knew. And the odds are overwhelming that our murderer is someone in this very hotel."

Ralph had been staring at Maggie rather keenly.

I took him aside and whispered. "No, Ralph. I've already checked that. She wears full dentures."

Maggie's eyes had been on the chalked outline and the blood still on the floor. "Do you mind if I clean that up now?"

The guests in the hotel had, of course, been aroused by the commotion of our arrival, and most of them had dressed and gravitated downstairs, congregating in the lobby.

Ralph and I left the kitchen and surveyed them.

"Ralph," I said, "There are toothpicks and then there are toothpicks."

"That's profound, Henry."

"Not profound, Ralph. Specific. Basically, there are two types of wooden toothpicks. There are the slightly pliable flat ones, pointed at one end and rounded at the other. And then there are the more rigid toothpicks which taper to a sharp point at each end. The toothpick of our murderer is of the first kind–the more conservative, the more traditional. From which I deduce that our murderer is a man of middle-years or beyond."

"I would deduce that too, Henry."

I was rather surprised. "You would?"

"The only suspects we got are middle-aged or older."

Well, that *was* one way of narrowing down the field, but I thought mine was more cerebral. I studied the guests in the lobby again. My attention focused on one individual in particular. "Ralph, our murderer is at this moment among those people in the lobby and I know who he is."

Ralph scanned the occupants. "I don't see anybody with a toothpick in his mouth."

I smiled charitably. "Ralph, that would be too easy. We must remember that toothpick addicts do not necessarily have them in their mouths twenty-four hours a day." I almost rubbed my hands. "Ralph, what comes with a toothpick?"

"Natural teeth?"

"Besides that, Ralph."

"I give up."

"*More* toothpicks, Ralph. Can you picture an habitual toothpick user venturing into the world equipped with but a *single* toothpick? Of course not. Toothpicks fray, they break, they fall inadvertently

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from lips and are lost underfoot. No, the user of wooden toothpicks would constantly have to have a *supply* of them on his person."

"You mean we should search everybody and the one packing toothpicks is the murderer?"

"No, Ralph. That would be rather tedious on the face of it and perhaps unconstitutional. However we can use the process of elimination to further cut down the number of our suspects. Now, think, Ralph, what do we know about toothpick users so far?"

"Not too much."

"Ralph, in this latter portion of our twentieth century is it common, likely, or even remotely likely that you would find a *woman* using toothpicks?"

"Why not?"

"At table in economy restaurants, perhaps. But can you imagine a woman carrying a supply of wooden toothpicks on her person, not to mention having one of them between her lips at the very moment of the murder? Besides, there was no trace of lipstick on our toothpick. And nowadays practically all women wear at least lipstick."

Ralph brightened a bit. "So we eliminate women and men with full dentures. Maybe that does cut down the list at that. What do we do now, look into the mouths of people and segregate the men who still have their own teeth?"

"That will not be necessary, Ralph. As a matter of fact, I can point out our murderer at this very moment."

Ralph blinked. "You know which one of them murdered Latimer?"

"Of course."

"Which one is it?"

"Ralph," I said, "suppose you are a toothpick user and you have just helped yourself to a half score of toothpicks. Where on your person would you store them?"

"In my pocket?"

"Yes, but which one?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes. Would you put them in the back pocket of your trousers? Certainly not. They would not meekly repose in such a roomy container. Their direction would lapse into anarchy and sitting down would become a dangerous adventure. In the front pockets? No. One would risk even more traumatic injury. In a suitcoat pocket? Again no. One could easily suffer skewered fingertips. No, Ralph. Think again. What is the *ideal* repository for a gaggle of toothpicks?"

"I give up."

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"The *vest,* Ralph. Does it not strike you that the vest was practically invented for toothpicks? Its pockets are sufficiently snug so that the toothpicks cannot migrate helter-skelter. They lie there dormant, docile, side by side, and safely available."

Ralph's eyes ran over our suspects. "How many of them are wearing vests?"

"Just one. That tall large man in the corner–the one with the glitter to his smile."

Ralph and I plucked the individual in question from the lobby and took him to a small anteroom.

"Your name, please?" I asked.

"Horace Latimer."

"Hm," I said thoughtfully.

Latimer nodded. "I'm the brother of the deceased. I've got a room next door. And naturally when I saw and heard the police cars zeroing in, I came over to see what was happening."

Horace Latimer bore only a slight resemblance to his dead brother, partly, I suppose, because his physiognomy was a contour map of dissipation. The ruddiness of his complexion was obviously not a sign of rampant health.

"How did you and your brother get along?"

"We didn't."

"You are quite candid."

"Why lie? You'll find out anyway. We didn't get along at all. As a matter of fact, last week was the first time we talked to each other in twenty years."

"You talked to him last week? Why?"

"I was broke. I lost my job and went to him for a little loan."

"Did you get it?"

"He gave me fifty bucks and told me to get lost for another twenty years. He wouldn't even give me a bed for the night."

"You lost your job? What kind of job was that?"

"I worked the lake boats."

"But no more?"

"I had a small argument with a third mate and accidentally cut him up a little."

"You hadn't seen your brother in twenty years and you received no open-armed welcome? Then why did you rent a room in the boardinghouse next door? Surely there must be hundreds of other places where you might have found lodging?"

"When I left Vic, I dropped in at the bar nearby for a drink. I

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found out that they needed a spare bartender and so I took the job. I been tending bar in the winter when the boats are frozen in and I got a license. I don't have a car and I don't like to waste money on bus fare, so when somebody told me about the roominghouse, I decided to settle in."

"Have you ever been in trouble with the police?"

He smiled slyly. "A few times."

"Anything serious?"

"A couple of years ago a friend of mine got stabbed to death."

"And you were a suspect?"

"They took me in, but my alibi stood solid. I was with my girl friend Elsie when Jake was killed. She was ready to swear to that in court."

"Where were you last night? Tending bar?"

"I got the day shift. I was in bed."

Naturally I asked. "Alone?"

He leered gold and silver. "No. I was with Elsie."

I ran my tongue over my teeth. "I seem to have a sesame seed stuck between my teeth. You wouldn't happen to have a toothpick on you?"

He produced one from his vest pocket. "On the house."

I drew Ralph aside. "The man is utterly gross, brazen, and arrogant. Keep your eye on him. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to the kitchen. I left our other toothpick on a counter. I'm going to make a comparison and I wouldn't be at all surprised if both toothpicks came from the same tree, possibly even abutting."

In the kitchen I found the murderer's toothpick and held both up to the light. To the naked eye they could have been clones.

Maggie Henderson watched me, probably wondering at the intricacies of the detective mind. Apparently giving up, she went to the large oven and pulled open the door. She peered critically at the cinnamon-raisin coffee cake, then reached into the pocket of her white uniform. She brought out a toothpick and inserted it into the cake. She withdrew it, regarded its clean contours, and said, "Done."

I stared at her uniform. There appeared to be a small hole in one of the pockets. The ends of several toothpicks peeked out. Soon one or more of them would work themselves free and fall to the floor.

I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, Maggie had removed the pan from the oven and put it on a wooden counter to cool.

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She sighed. "I've been thinking it all over and I guess I might just as well confess. I killed Victor. I mean what's the use of trying to deny it anyway? You police got all of those scientists and laboratories and you'll find all kinds of clues. So I might as well confess now and get it over with and clear my conscience."

I matched and surpassed her sigh. "Okay. Why did you kill him?"

"He told me that he was going to marry some girl he'd met at the Hotelkeepers Convention in Sheboygan. She's a waitress at a topless bar and discotheque."

"Why did the fact that he was going to marry her disturb you that much?"

She regarded me placidly. "I been working here as a cook for twenty-two years, but that's not all I've been."

I thought that over and then blushed. "You don't mean that you and he–"

She nodded. "Of course everybody in the hotel knows and so I might as well admit that too. You can't keep a thing like that secret for twenty-two years. Maybe not even twenty-two days. For the record, I got a single room on the fourth floor, but the last time I used it was in 1966."

She poured herself some coffee. "Last night I was washing up a few things that the help forgot to do, when Victor came into the kitchen. He'd had a few drinks, like he always does when he wants to build up his courage about something, and then he came right out with it and said that he was going to marry this girl because he was crazy about her."

I nodded. "And in a fit of mad jealousy you snatched up the bread knife and stabbed him?"

"Not exactly. I mean the twenty-two years weren't all that great. No, I guess I really killed him because he wanted me to leave the hotel. He didn't care to have me around, even just as a cook, because he figured she'd find out about us and get upset."

I sympathized. "Twenty-two years? And there was never an offer of marriage?"

"He told me he'd marry me if I got pregnant. Ten years went by and one night when he had a little too much brandy, he accidentally spilled the news that he had got himself a vasectomy long before he ever hired me."

"You should have left him immediately."

"I know. But after ten years you get used to a situation. And besides, I liked being the cook here. The guests were all nice and

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friendly. They never pointed fingers or snickered. So I stayed."

I put sugar into the coffee she had poured for me. "But then after twelve more faithful, though bleak, years, he suddenly wished to cast you aside. You grabbed a knife, killed him, wiped the fingerprints off the–"

"I didn't think anything about fingerprints. I just happened to be wearing rubber gloves because I was washing dishes."

Her handkerchief absorbed the trail of a tear. "I really don't mind so much for myself. I'm ready to take my punishment. It's just that I've failed Wendy."

"Wendy? Who's Wendy?"

"My niece. My sister's daughter. My sister is a widow. Her husband died when Wendy was born. He was a real sincere type person who thought it was his duty to be present at the birthing. He died of shock."

Maggie sighed. "So there was my sister with the kid and all alone and either she had to get a job and neglect the baby or go on Aid for Dependent Children and just scratch along. So I told her to go on AFDC and I been helping her out so that she's got a higher standard of living. I might have moved in with her myself, only that was when I didn't know about Victor's vasectomy and still had my own hopes."

She shook her head sadly. "Wendy did real good at school and now she's a pre-med student. She's going to specialize."

"Ah, yes. Gynecology?"

"No. Male diseases. She always was a spunky little devil. She told me personally that some day she's going to find a cure for euphoria. But her dream is over now because she needs my financial help to see her through medical school and I won't be able to give it any more."

I pondered. A basically good woman who had been cruelly deceived would be sent to prison and this hotel would fall into the hands of a man who had undoubtedly committed murder in the past.

"Maggie," I said, "do you realize that you were Victor Latimer's common-law wife?"

She seemed surprised. "I was? I thought I was just a–"

I held up a hand. "No, you were his common-law wife. The statutes are very firm on that. And as his common-law wife you are now his common-law widow. And further, the inheritance rights of common-law widows take absolute precedence over the inheritance rights of estranged brothers of the deceased."

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She thought about that. "But I killed Victor. I know that a murderer isn't supposed to profit from her murder."

"How tragically true. And so Victor's brother will get the hotel. Wendy's hopes and dreams for a medical career will be shattered. At best she will probably have to settle for Licensed Practical Nurse. And while you are in Taycheedah, Victor's brother will be smoking five-dollar cigars and trying to make out with the new cook."

She was unhappy, but resigned. "Well, that's the way it goes."

I finished my cup of coffee. "I will now read you your rights, which I have forgotten to do as of this moment. Then I will take you to police headquarters. Your confession will be taped and transcribed by a stenographer and you will be asked to sign all five copies. It's lucky for us you confessed. Actually we don't have one shred of solid evidence against you."

She stood up. "Don't worry. I'll cooperate."

"Hm," I said. "That's what you say now. But what will happen when you get to headquarters? You will probably retract that confession. You will claim that you were browbeaten into making one. Or, worse yet, you might even go so far as to maintain that you had never made any at all to anyone in the first place. You might decide to just sit tight and not rock the boat and get rid of your toothpicks, knowing that nobody can really prove that you killed Victor Latimer."

I consulted my watch. "Well, let's get on to headquarters and put that confession on record before you change your mind."

She stared at me for five seconds. "What confession?"

"See," I said. "I just *knew* that would happen."

I had another cup of coffee and two pieces of cinnamon-raisin cake before I rejoined Ralph.

"What kept you so long?" he asked.

"Ralph, did you ever realize that one toothpick looks pretty much like another toothpick?"

He agreed. "Henry, I got to admire your brain. Now and then. It was absolutely brilliant how you picked up that little toothpick and came up with all the right answers and led us to the murderer."

"Well, it is just possible that I may have—"

"Brilliant, Henry. And so now I know and you know that Horace Latimer murdered his brother. Probably to get the hotel. But, Henry, we got to face reality. What hard evidence do we really have against him? Suppose we went to the captain with those toothpicks and our conclusions. He'd laugh us out of his office. Maybe he'd even giggle.

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Would you want something like that to happen to us, Henry?"

I frowned. Euphoria?

Ralph put a hand on my shoulder. "Henry, I think that you and I ought to keep this under our hats. About the toothpicks, I mean. At least until we get some really hard evidence." Pessimism touched his brow. "But somehow this time I got the gut feeling that we're never going to send our murderer to jail."

How true that was.

"Q"

"Give me the gun, darling—I'll handle everything." . . .

BEST LAID SCHEME

by DOROTHY A. COLLINS

The judge's wife walked over to the young attorney and pressed a gun into his hand.

"The judge is in his study," she said softly. "Go in there and shoot him. I'll give you an alibi, darling."

The young lawyer recoiled. "You must be out of your mind!" he said, appalled. "How can you even think of such a thing?"

"It's all I've been thinking of for a long time," she answered, cupping his face in her hands and kissing him hungrily. "I want you. And we need his money if we're to have any kind of life together. Do it for me, my love."

"Impossible," he said, horror reflected in his voice. But she wrapped her arms around him more tightly and covered his face with kisses. "I must have you," she murmured. "You and the judge's fortune. I'll do it myself if I have to. Give me the gun, darling–I'll handle everything."

"No!" he cried, and as he struggled to free himself, the gun went off and shot him through the heart.

And that was how it happened that the young attorney died defending His Honor.

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This is the 529th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . The story of a young lifeguard at a swimming pool and her deepest emotion . . .

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In this fine first story the manner of earning a living and the locale have served the author well . . .

THE LATE SWIMMER

by M. K. HOUGHTALING

She relished those few minutes she had alone with the pool. She would walk around its perimeter looking for pieces of gum, toys, bathing caps–all the debris from the afternoon swim classes. The pool lay serene, shimmering, casting aqua shadows on the ceiling and walls. It seemed to be resting from the commotion of children and anxious mothers. There was a clinical, futuristic feeling conveyed as she padded barefoot on the cement floor. The tiled walls, the omnipresent hum of the filters, and the warm chlorine-laden air made her think of a watery laboratory.

Some days she would swim alone before the adult free swim started. As a child, she had learned to swim in sandy-bottomed lakes. Swimming in an indoor pool was still a slightly sinister experience. Maybe the artificiality of a swimming pool carried a certain corruption. This baptism in a chemical solution along with the eerie presence of machinery made her uneasy. The tiled walls and

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aqua surface became an echo chamber, sounds being bounced back and forth until they were absorbed. So she swam more rapidly, doing length after length and trying not to think of being sucked into the drain or enveloped by the unknown shadow in the corner of the deep end.

There was a core of six regulars who came for the adult free swim every Tuesday and Thursday evening. From her vantage point on the plastic lifeguard stand, she felt like a professional voyeur. The almost naked beings moving through the water were so vulnerable and dependent. Too busy with the mechanics of breathing and lifting arms and legs, they were not annoyed or embarrassed by the inspection they underwent in their battle with the water.

Sometimes when buying an evening paper or shopping at the supermarket, she thought she recognized some swimmer from the pool, but she was never sure. Bathing caps and goggles have a way of providing anonymity. So she had no idea how their days were spent outside the pool. She would smile and wave from the stand as they emerged from the locker rooms onto the deck of the pool. Occasionally someone would comment on the temperature of the water or ask for a bathing cap. Lifeguards, like bus drivers, were not to be distracted by conversations with the people they served. But sometimes she yearned to jump into the water, swim along beside them, and after a few laps, hang onto the side of the pool and chat.

All the regulars stayed the whole hour. Some swam length after length with only two or three rests. Two older ladies took a more leisurely approach to this regimen. Skin wobbling, they met the water with shyness. Using a passable crawl stroke, they stopped often to talk. It dismayed her that the hearty swimmers only used one or two styles. They were missing the beauty of swimming. They didn't let the water caress them, but assaulted it with their monotonous strokes. It was sad that they had never noticed how the water flows differently with a change in movement, how a person can create new currents by switching from the breaststroke to the side.

She had got the job several months ago. She took two courses at the college, but she couldn't handle full-time studies. Reading and note-taking seemed banal and unimportant; she really couldn't concentrate. She lived in an efficiency apartment within walking distance of the pool. The daily routine involved a lot of walking–to the market, to the college, to work. Walking was good for her. Her

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parents understood her not wanting to live at home. It was best. This way she wasn't a constant reminder of the daugher they'd lost, and she wasn't meeting her sister's ghost in every familiar space that they had shared.

There were routines within routines. On the mornings she opened the pool, she arrived at seven. First she took the water temperature, then a water sample for chlorine content and pH value. If necessary, she either superchlorinated or added sodium bisulfate. Next a check to see that the ring buoys were coiled and hung correctly, that the poles were in their proper places, and that the first-aid kit was complete. On Tuesday and Thursday evenings, when she closed the pool, she put the equipment in order and checked the door that led to the outside, as well as the locker room doors. The outside door was an emergency exit and used now and then to move large pieces of equipment in or out.

During the job orientation the other lifeguard had stressed the importance of making sure the outside door was locked securely at night. Several years ago the door had been shut but not locked by the lifeguard going off duty. A ten-year-old boy had come into the pool, probably with fantasies of having all that water to himself. He had left his clothes on the lifeguard stand. His body was found the next morning against the side, at the bottom beneath the five-foot mark.

The two nights that she closed the pool had a pattern. Having checked all the doors, having turned out the lights, she would start to enter the women's locker room. Then, even though she knew for certain that the emergency door was locked, she would turn on the lights and walk the full length of the deck (the pool lying like a dog watching you between half-closed lids) and make sure it really was locked.

There had been no mishaps during her shifts. Oh, there had been one bloody nose, but no cramps, no slipping on the deck, not even a case of an exhausted swimmer. Sitting on her perch, she would imagine various emergencies and how she would handle them. The florid-faced man clutching his chest and losing his horizontal position; the two-year-old slipping from its mother's arms; the insecure swimmer veering away from the side of the pool and unable to reach the edge. She respected water; it carried deceit within its fluid nature. She had seen three drowned bodies in her life. One had been treated kindly by the water, making everyone in the rescue party think that the little girl was only sleeping. The other two had been

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lost for a while. Their finding was a reminder of how grotesque the human body could become.

One Tuesday evening, after the six regulars were in the water, the door of the men's locker room opened and a new swimmer entered. He was not over 20 and he had that slightly bowlegged look that thin athletic people have. Although it was well into fall, he still had a respectable tan. He surveyed the pool with disdain and did a racing dive from the deep end and butterflied a length.

She knew him immediately, but there was no fear that he knew her. His vigorous display in the water intimidated the two older ladies paddling near the shallow end. He didn't bother with pool courtesy, a greeting or a smile to the other swimmers, but executed his underwater turn and surged through the water. After several laps of the butterfly, he braced himself against the edge of the pool, far removed from the others. His arms in the bracket position, he practised a powerful flutter kick.

Seeing that he wasn't friendly, the regulars watched his performance and then ignored him for the rest of the hour. She never had to blow the whistle to announce the pool closing. Someone would notice the time and get out of the water and the others would follow.

"Good night and thank you. See you on Thursday," said an aristocratic-looking man. He always thanked her. For seeing that he didn't drown? There were scattered "good nights." The new swimmer was too busy with his technique or too uncaring to notice that he was the only person in the pool. Now he was doing the backstroke.

She walked to the shallow end of the pool. As he reached back to touch the edge, she called out, "I'm closing the pool now." She noticed he shaved his armpits. Of course swim-team members shaved off practically all their hair, but it annoyed her as an affectation.

"Okay," he grinned, "one more length."

She was standing by the locker-room door with her keys as he climbed out of the pool. "Hey, is this the geriatric hour? I'd like to swim against someone, but it looks like a heart-attack clinic."

"I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place. These people just enjoy relaxing and getting a little exercise," she replied coolly.

"Well, sure, that's nice. I'm on the swim team at the college and I thought I'd check out this pool. Never been here before. Maybe I'll be back. Ciao."

The locker-room door slammed shut behind him. She locked it. The sounds of the shower and a popular song he was whistling echoed behind the door as she went through her closing-up ritual,

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her body tight with anger. He need not have bothered bragging to her. She knew he was one of the two freshmen chosen to be on the college swim team. She had followed his accomplishments with obsessive interest for the past year. After double-checking the outside door, she turned out the lights, entered the women's locker room, and locked that door behind her.

Gus, her supervisor, was leaving the building too. "Hi. Our paths haven't crossed in a few weeks. Sorry I've left you to fend for yourself. Any problems in the pool?"

"No, Gus, nothing I haven't been able to handle. Oh, I had to chase out a college student tonight after free swim. He wasn't too anxious to leave." She was stretching the truth, but she knew that Gus would remember the comment.

"Keep up the good work and let me know if you need me as a bouncer."

"Thanks. 'Night, Gus."

Her class on Wednesday evening ended at eight, after which she ate with her parents. She alternately dreaded and looked forward to this weekly occasion. She could smell pork chops and sauerkraut as she opened the front door. Her mother and father were both at the dining-room table, sharing the evening newspaper.

"Anyone home?" she asked with more cheerfulness than she felt.

"Sure, hon, I guess we didn't even hear you come in. We're having one of your favorites tonight," said her mom.

She didn't say anything. She had always liked pork and sauerkraut, but it had been Cheryl's favorite dish.

"How's the class coming, sweetie? I don't suppose you need any help with your homework any more," said her dad.

"Not yet, but I may before the mid-term exam." She kissed the bald spot on his head, a patch that seemed to grow a little larger each time she saw him. She'd noticed also that the lines on her mother's face were not as graceful as they had been a year ago.

After clearing off the table, while her mother was dishing out the dessert, she went upstairs. She tiptoed to the end of the hallway and opened the door into Cheryl's room. As she turned on the light, she almost expected to see Cheryl sprawled across the bed, napping or reading or talking on the phone. The bookcase beside the bed held scrapbooks, diaries, some paperbacks, and high-school yearbooks.

She had to be sure, had to see his face on the glossy paper. Yes, there he was with that same cocky smirk, no pain hidden way back in the eyes, no touch of sadness. And, of course, he had been captain

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of the swim team. Cheryl had not lived to graduate or to receive this yearbook. The school must have sent it to her parents.

After her first date with him, Cheryl had come to the dorm to tell her about this "really neat guy" she'd gone out with. The sloe gin had been taken from its hiding place in a shoe box, and they had toasted to Cheryl's good time. Most sisters were not friends the way she and Cheryl had been friends.

"Well, kid," she'd said, a little tipsy from the sloe gin, "you'll have to let me meet this dashing stranger." But she'd never met him. Her parents had never met him. Cheryl developed a habit of waiting for him until swim practise was over, and then they'd ride around and maybe get something to eat or maybe just park some place–oh, Cheryl, you shouldn't have let anyone make you unhappy.

She'd seen her sister lose her glow. When questioned, Cheryl had said yes, she was still seeing him; everything was fine. Maybe everything had been fine for someone who had no emotional depth, someone who had never cared for anyone besides himself. But for Cheryl it couldn't have been fine.

She stopped in the bathroom, flushed the toilet, and let some water run in the sink. No one ever went into Cheryl's room and she didn't want her parents to know she had been in there.

The next few weeks melted into each other. Her daily life held few surprises. Then one Thursday night as she was closing the pool–all the swimmers had left and the showers were silent–the men's locker-room door was jerked open and in he came.

"Hello again. Hope I didn't catch you with your guard down," he said in his way of being charming and friendly. The charm and friendliness were wasted on her.

Startled by his abrupt entry, she was embarrassed that he had made her jump. She managed a casual smile at his pun and said, "Sorry, the pool is closed. I was just going to lock the doors."

"Oh, don't mind me. The guy at the front desk was busy. He didn't even see me come in. I thought I'd take a quick dip."

"Was there anyone in the locker room?" she asked, her heart thudding dully.

"Nope, all the old fogies have gone home."

With a flawless racing dive he attacked the water. Trying not to think too much about what she was doing, she walked back to the outside exit and made sure the door was secure, for now. Then she locked the door to the women's locker room. It only took a few seconds to slip into the men's locker room and find his clothes. They

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were lying on a bench. She locked the door after her. No one could come into the pool. Anyone using the pool was supposed to sign in at the front desk, but his signature would not be on the sheet.

Only his body and the water existed for him now. He didn't notice her placing his clothes in a pile–jacket on the bottom, then the shirt, jeans, jockey shorts, shoes and socks on the side. She checked to make sure he carried a penknife. Yes, there was one in his pocket. Good thing. She wouldn't use it; her nail file would make similar scratches on the door.

He was doing a perfect breaststroke while the outside door was quietly opened and scratches were made on the metal plate and on the latch as a nail file was slipped into the crack between the door and the frame. She was careful to let her fingers touch only the inside of the door. She closed it, this time making sure it wasn't locked. This door was not locked from the inside with a key but by depressing a long bar.

The sequence of her actions seemed to follow naturally. If she had planned them in advance, they wouldn't have flowed so smoothly. She stood beside his clothes as he swam toward her. Without pausing to catch his breath, he gasped, "So, baby, how about a drink after you close up?"

So sure of himself, not even waiting for an answer, he started to submerge, preparing to push off for another length. At that moment the metal pole she was holding came down with a ringing thud on the top of his head. She never had to meet his eyes. As his body began its slow descent, she put the pole back in its proper place and turned out the lights. Swimmers often hit their heads on the end of the pool. It stood to reason that a vigorous swimmer could strike his head dangerously hard. It was known that the best swimmers, careful in technique and precision, were often the most careless in safety.

She didn't remember walking back to the apartment. She was standing at her desk, the narrow drawer in the middle open. She reread, for the hundredth time, the tattered clipping:

ONE FATALITY IN CAR-TRUCK CRASH

Last night route 51, west of Turner's Corner, was the scene of the county's third fatality this year. Cheryl Timmer, a senior at Weatherton High School, was dead on arrival at General Hospital at 11:58 P.M.

Miss Timmer, 17, and the driver of the car, Louis Briggs, 18, were

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headed west on route 51. Their car collided with a truck driven by Burt Watson, 31, at the intersection of routes 51 and 224.

The drivers of the two vehicles were treated and released at General Hospital. Neither driver has been charged. Police are still investigating. Last night's thick fog is considered to have been a contributing factor.

He hadn't been charged. He hadn't come to the funeral. He hadn't called or sent a note. Her parents had been too occupied with grief to consider this outrage. Mr. Briggs had called her father and said that his son was "very upset about the whole thing" and that it had been "an unavoidable accident."

Tomorrow's paper would carry another item that she would clip and save. Friday mornings the other guard opened the pool. She would have to wait until evening to read about it in the local paper.

"Q"

The Fall/Winter '79 Edition of Ellery Queen's Anthology, No. 38, is here!

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EQMM119

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

We quote from the author's letter which accompanied EQMM's "first story" number 530: "I'm fifteen years of age, male, single, and hope to major in medicine in college. I attend Sacred Heart High School, play on its football team, and am trying my best to dive headfirst into my friend's swimming pool. I'm presently a young aspiring musician with a taste for adventure and scared to death of high places." Blessings to St. Edgar for the young!

FIRST LESSON IN MURDER

by MAURIZIO PERLI

"My name is Joe–Joseph P. Dahlgren. Hitman, murderer, cold-blooded killer–whatever pleases your vocal cords. I'm told you want to learn how to hit people. Well, for starters, it ain't easy. Not at all like in the movies or crime magazines. It's a tough game, kid, and you've got to learn it right. Come on, sit down, and I'll give you your first lesson.

"When you get a contract, learn as much about the fish as possible. Case his joint. Follow him around. Find out where he likes to hang out. Then you go in for the kill. But how do you want to do it? Knife him? Shoot him? Drown him?

"Well, the best thing is to find a way that will fool the cops. If he's a fancy gambler, fix it to look like he was snuffed by a creditor. Get him in his apartment. Make it look kind of messy–like there was a struggle. If he's a rich cookie, make it look like an amateur got him. Works like a charm. You know, the broken window, the messed-up drawers, the stolen silverware.

"And now for the toughest one. An underworld criminal. Let's say a real tough-looking scarf that owns half of Chicago. Make it look like an execution. Hit him over the head but only to knock him out, or even better, surprise him and rivet his shell to the wall with a submachine gun.

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"Well, I guess you understand the first lesson. Come back tomorrow and we'll start on Senatorial types and political assassinations.

"You got a bright future in the underworld, kid. Ah, by the way, what did you say your name was? Al Capone, huh? Pretty catchy name. Okay, I'll see you later, Al."

"Q"

In its November 16, 1978 issue, "Scholastic Voice" magazine announced "A Whodunit Writing Contest"–"Contest No. 2: Write a Mini-Mystery and Win $25!" The mini-mystery was to be no longer than two double-spaced typewritten pages, and was to be accompanied by a teacher-signed or parent-signed statement that the story was "original, not copied from someone else's work." "Scholastic Voice" asked your Editor to serve as final judge of the contest and we agreed to read the four stories considered the best of the more than 1000 entries received.

We awarded first prize to Lisa Mueser of Mars High School, Mars, Pa., for her detective short-short titled "The Circus Mystery," and we congratulate the young author, her parents, and her teacher, Mrs. Erica Schnur. The winning story appeared in the March 22, 1979 issue of "Scholastic Voice," and is here reprinted as a companion piece to Maurizio Perli's "First Lesson in Murder." Both stories were written by teenagers, and what a contrast they offer! The future of the detective-crime story is in safe hands—if only the young ones persist!

THE CIRCUS MYSTERY

by LISA MUESER

The Ballantine Brothers, Angelo and Dominic, the world's most famous trapeze act, were leaving the Bartoni Brothers' Circus. I attended their last performance. As usual, they appeared in the center ring wearing pink sequinned costumes, which glittered as

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they flew through the air. Their act had been as exciting as ever, and I was just beginning to enjoy myself.

Soon afterward I was summoned to the manager's office. When I arrived there, I found several people crowded into the small room. There was the manager, who was holding an icepack to his head, the Ballantine Brothers, and my sergeant, Joe Dobbs. The manager, Mr. Greene, was mumbling, "I can't believe it. $25,000–gone."

It was then that I began to ask questions. "Suppose you tell us exactly what happened," I said.

"It happened a few minutes after the Ballantines' performance," Greene said. "I had just begun to count the money when I heard footsteps outside my door. Before I knew it, someone had come up behind me and hit me over the head. When I regained consciousness, all the money was gone."

"Do you have any idea what the robber looked like?"

After a long pause Greene answered. "I don't mean to imply that it was one of the Ballantine Brothers, but before I lost consciousness I saw a flash of pink."

Angelo Ballantine immediately snapped, "I was in my dressing room changing my costume right after the performance, but Dominic was nowhere to be found."

Dominic replied. "I was just outside the curtain watching the juggling act that comes after ours."

Sergeant Dobbs was about to take the suspects into custody for further questioning when I spoke. "I know who stole the money. There is no need to take everybody downtown, because I can solve this mystery right here." Everyone looked at me with surprise.

Do you know whom I suspected and why?

"Q"

Solution to

THE CIRCUS MYSTERY

I suspected Mr. Greene, the manager. If he had *just begun* to count the money, how would he know that $25,000 was stolen? Also, if it was one of the Ballantine Brothers, Mr. Greene would not have *heard footsteps* outside the door because trapeze artists wear slipper-like shoes.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

IN SOME QUARTERS: Two quarterly magazines should be known to aficionados of the mystery.

The first is *London Mystery Selection* (Norman Kark Publications, 268-270 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London, SW1V 1BB, England), an anthology of original mystery fiction, some factual material, and several pages of reviews of (naturally) British mysteries. Last year the (London) *Times* pointed out that Major Kark, the publisher, has a policy barring "viciousness and salaciousness" from the pages of this handsome, pocket-sized publication. But a sampling of stories in a recent issue suggests that there is no barring of good storytelling or suspense. A subscription is well worth the annual $4.00 fee.

A little further afield (and a bit tardy, I fear) is the Fall 1978 issue of *Kansas Quarterly* (Volume 10, #4), which is devoted to "Sub-Genres in Contemporary Fiction." One of the "sub-genres" covered is, naturally, the mystery and detective story, with such interesting items as "Developments in Espionage Fiction" and "The Case for Raymond Chandler's Fiction as Romance." It's a nice case, too, though you won't be convinced. The highlight of the issue is John J. McAleer's excellent overview, "The Game's Afoot: Detective Fiction in the Present Day." Back-issue copies are available for $2.50 from Kansas Quarterly, Department of English, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506.

FOR A DIME: Remember those great, garishly colored pulp magazines of the 1930s and thereabouts? Remember the great writers who worked for them—the Hammetts, Chandlers, Woolriches, Whitfields, Nebels, Gardners, and so on? Remember when they cost a dime? Times have changed a bit, but there are still many who revel in the fast-paced stories of Maxwell Grant, Carroll John Daly, and Lester Dent. To satisfy these fans of adventure and nostalgia, Robert Weinberg and Ray Walsh have founded the Pulp Press, dedi-

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cated to reprinting the best of the previously unreprinted stories from those magazines. The first book contains two novels by Lester Dent, the creator of Doc Savage: *Hades* and *Hocus Pocus.* It's not a dime any more—it's $12.95—but it is clothbound and well produced. It is not available at the corner newsstand either, but can be ordered directly from Pulp Press, 10606 South Central Park, Chicago, IL 60655.

NO SENSE: I blew it. In September's issue, I listed the Edgar-winning film of 1978 as *Death on the Nile.* I admit, with a sinking feeling, that my memory failed me. The true winner was William Goldman's *Magic.*

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

A "lost" Agatha Christie film unearthed and about to be released is always good news. EQMM recently screened the British Lion-EMI version of *Endless Night,* made in 1971 but until now not seen in the United States—no doubt because of its twisty, cerebral plot and intelligent treatment, the work of veteran Sidney Gilliat, who both wrote and directed this extraordinary mystery film. The genius of Gilliat—he is the one who with partner Frank Launder gave us such other screenplay landmarks as the 1938 *Lady Vanishes* and the 1947 *Green for Danger*—has achieved an elegant work of art, to which Bernard Herrmann has added a mood-heavy but perfect musical score. *Endless Night* is endless delight.

Christie wrote the book source of this film in six weeks when she was 77, and meant it to be a successor to the least-likely-suspect variant she used first in her classic *Murder of Roger Ackroyd,* a device very difficult to translate into screen terms—although *Ackroyd* itself became both a stage play and a film in the early '30s.

As in the 1968 novel, engaging young hero Michael (Hywel Bennett) is a hired driver with rich clients and rich tastes, driven by troubling nightmares and a vision of a dream life at Gypsy's Acre, a verdant plot of land on the Cornwall coast ringed by forests and a view of the sea. Intruding on this good earth—and to own it has become Michael's obsession—comes the beautiful American girl Ellie (Hayley Mills), and love blossoms too on the land. She is "the sixth richest girl in the world." A dying Swedish architect (superbly played by Per Oscarsson) who loves both youngsters builds a fantastic futuristic house on the Acre, but

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dark clouds gather. Ellie's domineering young German tutor (Britt Ekland) tries to re-enter her life. A local old crone like a black raven warns the girl to "go, before the harm is done." And harm does come.

Gilliat's *Night* lets daylight into the Christie story, improving it at every turn, especially in establishing the characters at the start and working out the difficult ending.

Without the sex and violence necessary for theater release or network sale (although there are scenes both sexy and violent), *Endless Night* can probably only be viewed on *late* night *TV,* early next year. Watch for it. It will be worth it roaming Gypsy's Acre and listening to its legends.

Coincidentally, another "lost" film of the same vintage recently surfaced, the two-hour Charlie Chan telefeature made in 1971 but never shown. Originally called, somewhat archly, *Happiness Is a Warm Clue,* but more soberly retitled *The Return of Charlie Chan,* it was filmed in Vancouver harbor locations with Ross Martin as the detective. (Martin, a Polish-American, is best remembered as the killer in *Experiment in Terror* and the chameleon-faced sidekick in the *Wild, Wild West* series.) Chan has been lured out of retirement and onto the luxury yacht of wealthy industrialist Hadrachi (Leslie Nielsen) because of an assassination attempt—alas, however, it seems an older, far less vital Chan, and the son and daughter who accompany him are less hip and obnoxious than in the old days but also less endearing. "Beyond a doubt, Mr. Chan, you're the most interesting person aboard this ship," a woman guest coos at the detective, and rightly so, for the suspects are mostly a dull lot, and when murder strikes it is not the great Hadrachi who is victim but his male secretary.

Chan manages a few aphorisms ("It is wisely written, even a hair casts a shadow") and when the tycoon, enraged that his secrets are being uncovered, yells at Chan: "This is no Olympian challenge, it is a simple case," we can but agree. The script, however, has its literate moments, and Camus as well as Confucius is quoted during this, to date Chan's final screen investigation.

Writer Anitra Earle sometime back informed EQMM she had prepared a screen treatment of *The Chinese Parrot,* neither updating nor spoofing the Chan novel but recreating it in cinematic terms. "I felt the story deserved conscientious and even lavish treatment on the big screen. The old Chan B's . . . never tackled Earl Derr Biggers' original, Byzantine plots. And I think it is a great shame that Biggers, who was a staunch proponent of both racial and sexual equality, should be recalled nowadays as the creator of a racial stereotype because of those earlier films . . . All the more reason, I think, for the 'real' adven-

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tures of the 'real' Chan to have their day."

Thank you so much, no doubt Charlie would say to Ms. Earle, and hopefully he will be given another chance to carry on.

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INTERVIEW: WILLIAM L. DeANDREA

If there is a better way to start a career as a mystery writer than winning an Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America for Best First Novel, it would have to be a surprise to us all. William L. DeAndrea won that coveted award this year for *Killed in the Ratings* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $7.95; Avon, $1.95). His new book, *The Hog Murders* (Avon, $1.95), indicates that the quality of the first novel was no fluke.

EQMM: Who or what influenced you to become the kind of writer you are?

DeANDREA: I became a mystery fan because of Ellery Queen. I was sick in bed and came upon *The Adventures of Ellery Queen* and my reaction was: how long has this been going on? As to writing style, I've consciously assimilated a lot of Rex Stout and Ed McBain; I just hope I can be that good someday. I feel very strongly, incidentally, that detective stories are valid, important literature—or can be, anyway. You can do anything in a detective story that you can do in any other type of novel. Entertainment is the important part, but you can have a message there.

EQMM: But you do have a message in your books, a viewpoint?

DeANDREA: I see them as situation tragedy. Terrible things happen in funny ways, which is my view of life. That's how life seems to happen. Also it's awfully hard to be a good guy these days.

EQMM: You think nice guys finish last?

DeANDREA: Bad guys have a few advantages.

EQMM: And you reflect that view in your fiction?

DeANDREA: I like to explore the problems of someone who is trying to be a nice guy—a good man in a corrupt situation.

EQMM: How do you resolve that philosophical problem in terms of a detective story? Don't you let your hero win?

DeANDREA: There are no unmixed blessings. Matt Cobb (in *Killed in the Ratings)* and my other protagonists always solve the crime but there is also always something sad.

EQMM: So we can never expect a happy ending in a Bill DeAndrea book?

DeANDREA: Hopeful endings, anyway.

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Few real life events of recent years have provided as much raw material for writers of spy fiction as the career of Kim Philby, the British intelligence officer and journalist who, after many years as a Russian agent, finally defected to the Soviet Union in 1963.

The latest fictional outgrowth of the Philby case offers a particularly ingenious and complicated plot, along with the sense of grim farce appropriate to an espionage novel.

**** Andre Jute: *Reverse Negative,* Norton, $9.95. Philby stages his own death, threatening the release of documents that would embarrass both East and West. The result is havoc among intelligence agencies of several powers and unexpected adventures for a Cambridge historian identified as the mysterious "fourth man" responsible for recruiting Philby, Burgess, and Maclean to the Soviet cause. The tale is told alternately by the historian's diary and by a computer scenario (80 percent probability) of what all the other characters must have been doing. This novel is nicely written, quite unusual, and highly satisfactory, however seriously you decide to take it.

*** R. E. Harrington: *Death of a Patriot,* Putnam, $8.95. Here is another richly plotted espionage adventure, offering fresh variations on 1. the semi-reluctant spy, 2. the senior-citizen caper, 3. the "Red-Headed League"-type work assignment, and 4. the not-so-Great Impersonation. The twisting plot and well drawn characters are the strengths here, though second-generation C.I.A. agent Hobbes is guilty of at least one highly implausible and irresponsible action.

*** Leigh Nichols: *The Key to Midnight,* Pocket Books, $2.50. The tale of Joanna Rand, a night-club singer in Kyoto, Japan, whose memory has been erased, and Alex Hunter, the wealthy private detective who helps her find her past, is a very captivating mixture of romance, detection, and international intrigue. The wild plot is executed with conviction, and the novel is very hard to put aside. (I will resist speculating on the pseudonymous author's identity beyond saying that he or she is obviously a practiced pro with a strong interest in things oriental.)

*** Dorothy Gilman: *The Tightrope Walker,* Doubleday, $7.95. Amelia Jones, 22 years old, overcomes her shyness and insecurity by buying a junk shop, finding a message in a hurdy-gurdy from a possible murder victim, and with the help of her graphologist boy friend solving the mystery. Gilman's skillful blending of romantic suspense and detection pro-

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duces a gripping novel to be read at one sitting if possible.

*** W. J. Burley: *Wycliffe and the Scapegoat,* Doubleday-Crime Club, $7.95. The latest from another solid pro involves a Cornish Hallowe'en ritual and the disappearance of the local undertaker, a man surrounded by well motivated potential murderers, and delivers a fine double-bluff denouement. (The blurb-writer to the contrary, this is more than the third recorded case for Chief Superintendent Wycliffe, though it is only the third to have his name in the title.)

*** Peter Alding: *Ransom Town,* Walker, $7.95. English series cop Bob Fusil must decide if the arsonists threatening the town of Fortrow are terrorists or merely villains. Several cases are involved, but the prolific author (a.k.a. Jeffrey Ashford) will keep you guessing whether this is a modular procedural (in the manner of Dell Shannon and J. J. Marric) or the various crimes will be connected at the end.

** Norma Shier: *Murder by the Book,* Zebra (Mystery Puzzler 26), $1.95. The second novel about Aspen, Colorado, District Attorney Kay Barth concerns the murder of a bookstore proprietor and provides a mystery addict's mystery reminiscent of Elizabeth Linington's *Greenmask.* The case is neatly clued even if the murderer's motivation takes some swallowing. Like other Zebras, this novel is on the borderline between adult and juvenile mystery fiction, though not as unsophisticated as some in the series.

** Kenn Davis: *The Forza Trap,* Avon, $1.95. Carver Bascombe, San Francisco private eye and law student, is a likeable character, but his second case, starting out as a promising mystery with an opera house background, regrettably turns into a grand scale disaster movie at the end.

Two cornerstone volumes of British detection are available in new hardcover editions. The late Edmund Crispin's 1945 debut, *The Case of the Gilded Fly* (Walker, $8.95; previous U.S. title *Obsequies at Oxford*), heralds a most welcome reprinting of Gervase Fen's cases, and Anthony Berkeley's *The Poisoned Chocolates Case* (Mystery Library, Drawer P, Del Mar, CA 92014, $7.95) celebrates its fiftieth anniversary in a handsome illustrated edition, including (among other special features) "The Avenging Chance," the classic short story whence the classic novel sprang; a new introduction and annotated Berkeley bibliography by James Sandoe, and a new alternate solution to the case by Christianna Brand.

Among the newer reprints is Dan Greenburg's grimly compelling 1978 novel, *Love Kills* (Pocket Books, $2.50), about a serial sex killer of young women in New York. The novel succeeds in creating suspense and a sense of terror, but its conclusion reveals a red herring of massive

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proportions and a failure of basic mystery writing technique. (Two features are here that annoy some readers, present tense and non-linear narrative, but they are relatively unobtrusive.)

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DETECTIVERSE

TEMPUS FUGIT

by CAROLYN T. CREW

The gold watch of Detective Lockett
Was lifted by a deft pickpocket.
There's no doubt he will solve the crime
As soon as he can find the time.

© 1979 by Carolyn T. Crew.

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RETAIL PRICE	DIS-COUNT PRICE
Alding, Peter	RANSOM TOWN	Walker	$7.95	$6.35
Allan, Stella	A MORTAL AFFAIR	Scribners	7.95	6.35
Babson, Marian	THE LORD MAYOR OF DEATH	Walker	7.95	6.35
Brett, Simon	A COMEDIAN DIES	Scribners	7.95	6.35
Bruce, Leo	DEATH IN ALBERT PARK	Scribners	8.95	6.95
Burley, W. J.	WYCLIFFE AND THE SCAPEGOAT	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Burns, Rex	ANGLE OF ATTACK	Harper & Row	9.95	7.95
Crispin, Edmund	THE CASE OF THE GILDED FLY	Walker	8.95	6.95
Forrest, Richard	THE DEATH IN THE WILLOWS	Holt, Rinehart & Winston	8.95	6.95
Freeling, Nicolas	THE WIDOW	Pantheon	8.95	6.95
Gilman, Dorothy	THE TIGHTROPE WALKER	Doubleday	7.95	6.35
Harrington, R. E.	DEATH OF A PATRIOT	Putnam	8.95	6.95
Hoch, Edward D., ed.	BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR—1979	Dutton	9.95	7.95
Hute, Andre	REVERSE NEGATIVE	Norton	9.95	7.95
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MacKenzie, Donald	RAVEN AFTER DARK	Houghton Mifflin	7.95	6.35
Perry, Anne	THE CATER STREET HANGMAN	St. Martin's	6.95	5.50
Peters, Ellis	RAINBOW'S END	Morrow	8.95	6.95
Price, Anthony	TOMORROW'S GHOST	Doubleday	8.95	6.95
Selwyn, Francis	SERGEANT VERITY AND THE BLOOD royal	Stein and Day	8.95	6.95

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a *NEW* Inspector Dover story by

JOYCE PORTER

Is Detective Chief Inspector Wilfred Dover of the prestigious Murder Squad of Scotland Yard growing mellow? Has the fat, sullen, slovenly, pasty-faced Dover ceased to grunt and growl and grumble? Well, not exactly . . . The main clue in this story is one your Editor has had in mind for years and has never been able to work out satisfactorily. Joyce Porter "done it" . . .

DOVER AND THE SMALLEST ROOM

by JOYCE PORTER

"Grut," she said, adding in case there might be any doubt about it, "*Miss* Grut."

She waited, thin-mouthed and disapproving, while Detective Sergeant MacGregor carefully wrote it down in his notebook.

"And you were the one who found the deceased, Miss Grut?"

"I was."

"And you are the late Mr. Zandarowski's—er—housekeeper?"

"In a way."

Miss Grut, perched in deliberate martyrdom on a hard wooden stool, faced the two detectives from Scotland Yard with her chin up and her shoulders squared. Unable to overcome her life-long habit of never yielding an inch to any man, she was turning out to be a rather difficult witness. Not that her uncooperativeness was bothering the senior and fatter of the two policemen over much. Introduced at the beginning of the interview as Detective Chief Inspector Dover, he had unerringly spotted the most comfortable chair in the room and collapsed thankfully into it. Now, with paunch out and eyes closed, he was sitting well back, having unselfishly delegated

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all responsibility for the initial stages of the investigation to his young, handsome, and care-worn assistant.

"I'm part owner of this house," explained Miss Grut reluctantly. "My father left it jointly to my sister and myself. When she died, her son inherited her share."

"That's the late Mr. Zandarowski?" queried Sergeant MacGregor, who was a bit of a fanatic about getting the facts straight.

"My sister married a Pole, for all the good it did her. Still"—Miss Grut stiffened her backbone still further—"I did keep house for my nephew though our living quarters are entirely separate and in no way can it be said that we shared anything other than a common roof."

"Oh, quite!" agreed Sergeant MacGregor encouragingly. "Now, if you could tell us exactly what happened . . ."

Miss Grut tossed her head. "There's nothing much to tell. I came into the studio here at eight o'clock this morning to see why he hadn't come in to his breakfast and there he was." She indicated the chalked outline on the bare boards of the studio floor. "Dead as mutton with his shirt all covered with blood and that dratted gun tossed over there in the corner."

MacGregor was trained to pick up even the faintest nuances. "You'd seen the gun before?"

"Of course. They'd lent it to him—hadn't they?—to do that book jacket. And some real ammunition. Of all the stupid things to do! I knew no good would come of it." She saw that MacGregor was looking a little lost. "My nephew was a commercial artist. Free-lance."

"Ah!" MacGregor did honestly feel he was beginning to get the hang of things. Speaking for himself, of course. How much was actually penetrating the thick skull and wax-filled ears of his somnolent superior was anybody's guess. "And how long had Mr. Zandarowski been in possession of this gun?"

"Since the day before yesterday. Saturday. He brought it back from London with him. As pleased as Punch that he'd got it in time for the party. Like a child with a new toy. Not," she added sourly, "that he was particularly child-like in any other respect. Far from it. That was his Polish blood, of course. He didn't get that sort of disgusting behavior from the Gruts."

MacGregor refrained for the moment from exploring this unsavory-sounding avenue. "You mentioned a party?"

"Sunday lunchtime," said Miss Grut with a shudder of distaste.

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"Wine and cheese. I was here for the first ten minutes or so, handing the food round. Then I left them to it, before things degenerated into the usual drunken orgies."

"Have you any idea what time the guests left?"

"Oh, they'd all gone by two. There's a limit to how much cheap wine you can drink at a sitting. And as for that cheese—well, I wouldn't have given it house room. Nasty, smelly, foreign muck!"

MacGregor stared dejectedly at his notebook. "It doesn't sound like a very enjoyable affair."

"It wasn't meant to be," said Miss Grut tartly. "He was just paying back local hospitality as cheaply as possible. Catch him wasting his money on old bores like Dr. Horncastle."

"Mr. Zandarowski wasn't married?"

"Only in the eyes of God. Divorced. Years ago. She couldn't stand his lecherous habits any longer and ran off with a Canadian. I don't know if any good came of that, either, but I doubt it. Since then Peter's consoled himself with an endless succession of concubines—if you can call it a succession when he was carrying on with three or four of them at the same time. Filthy beast! Sex mad! No woman was safe within a mile of him."

MacGregor ignored all the rules about methodical progression in murder investigations and tried to take a short cut. "Do you think that's why he was killed? By a jealous woman, perhaps?"

"Or a jealous husband," said Miss Grut, not without relish. "Carnality will be at the bottom of it somewhere. Why else should anybody shoot him down like a dog?"

"How about for the money?"

Both Miss Grut and MacGregor jumped. They had forgotten that there was a silent witness to their conversation—silent, that is, apart from the odd grunt that might have been a snore. Now, however, Chief Inspector Dover was apparently bursting into some semblance of life as he opened his eyes and actually spoke.

Miss Grut examined this marvel with justifiable caution. Of course, she'd been told that this was a high-ranking member of Scotland Yard's prestigious Murder Squad, but she hadn't believed it. Well, one only had to look at him! Fat, slovenly, pasty-faced—why, even his mustache was flaked with dandruff. And those clothes! Miss Grut squirmed. The least fastidious tramp would have jibbed at donning that filthy overcoat and that even filthier bowler hat. Oh, no, Miss Grut hadn't credited for one moment that this sullen, overweight, lethargic lump could possibly be a famous detective.

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Now, however, she wasn't quite so sure. Men were ever deceivers and maybe all this air of general stupidity and piggishness was just a clever camouflage, concealing the shrewd and penetrating brains underneath. Miss Grut decided to give Detective Chief Inspector Dover the benefit of the doubt.

"What money?"

Dover glared balefully. If there was one thing he couldn't stomach it was a woman who echoed his words like a bloody poll-parrot. "His money, of course!" He flapped a flabby hand to encompass the spacious and well appointed studio in which they were sitting. "All this lot. Who stands to get it now that What's-his-name's kicked the bucket?"

For the first time in her life Miss Grut envisaged the possibility of defeat in the battle of the sexes. "Well, I suppose I do," she admitted uneasily. "As next of kin. He never made a will though I was always telling him he ought to . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Dover sank back in his chair, losing interest now that he'd solved the entire case with one cunningly searching question. He was a passionate believer in delegation and was more than content to leave the final dotting of the i's and the crossing of the t's to his long-suffering sergeant.

MacGregor in the meantime was doing all he could to avoid catching Miss Grut's bewildered eye. God knows, after all these years, he should have grown hardened to the—for want of a better word—peculiarities of his lord and master, but he hadn't. Dover's loutish behavior was still the source of the most excruciating embarrassment.

MacGregor cleared his throat. "Er—perhaps you could give me the names of the people who were at Mr. Zandarowski's party, Miss Grut," he said, clutching desperately at the first thing that came into his mind.

Miss Grut had her own theories about who had murdered her nephew. "That's where you'll find the guilty party!" she said, nodding her head approvingly. "Apart from anything else, they're the only ones who would know he'd got that gun and the ammunition."

MacGregor waited patiently with his pencil poised. He did wish that, just occasionally, members of the general public would refrain from trying to do his job for him.

Miss Grut, preferring not to notice that Dover had hooked a chair up and was now thankfully depositing his filthy boots on it, began to tick off the prime suspects on her fingers. "There was old Dr.

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Horncastle, but you needn't bother about him. He might feel like avenging his daughter's honor but his arthritis wouldn't let him. He wouldn't be able to pick that gun up, never mind fire it. His daughter was at the party, too. Perlita Horncastle. Peter used to be very friendly with her at one time. Then there was Betsy Norman. She's divorced, and one can well see why."

"Is she another of your nephew's friends?"

Miss Grut nodded grimly. "I told you—anything in skirts. Or trousers, as they mostly are these days."

"Anybody else?"

"Lady Tisdale. Known locally as the Merry Widow and about as much of a lady as my old boot. And the same goes for Joan Wisbey. She's single but still hoping. Then there was Rodney Chesshire and his wife. Her name's Muriel but she likes to be called Spooky—so you can tell what sort *she* is. Have you got all that down?"

MacGregor repressed a little sigh and nodded.

"Mrs. Barclay-Rhys, but without Mr. Barclay-Rhys. He was invited but couldn't come—whatever that may mean. Oh, and there was young Fabian Eastholm. He was there, too. That's the lot."

MacGregor ran his eye down the list of names. "Only three men," he commented.

"If you count young Fabian," agreed Miss Grut, "but he's only sixteen. I should cross him off, if I were you, because he couldn't have driven the car."

MacGregor's head came up. "What car?"

"The murderer's car."

"The murderer's car!" repeated MacGregor helplessly, thankful for once that Dover was taking no part in the proceedings.

"It must have been," said Miss Grut. "It drove up here at about half-past eight last night. Whoever it was didn't stay more than ten minutes before driving off again. That's more than long enough to shoot Peter dead and wipe your fingerprints off everything."

"You mean you actually heard the shot?" demanded MacGregor furiously, sheer exasperation overcoming his natural courtesy. "Why in God's name didn't you say so before?"

"No, I did not hear the shot!" snapped Miss Grut. "And I'd be grateful if you'd kindly watch your language, young man. This is, after all, a house of mourning. Now, if you'll just listen for a minute, I'll explain. Last night a car drove up the lane. The lane's a dead end and this is the only house in it, so the car must have been coming here. I didn't hear the shot because I was watching one of

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those Wild Western films on the telly and it was all shooting."

"Just a minute!" MacGregor had already been given a good idea of the layout of the house and the desire to put Miss Know-it-all Grut in the wrong sharpened his wits no end. "Your sitting room is right at the back of the house. If you were too far away to hear a revolver fired here in the studio, how is it that you were able to hear a car driving up in the first place?"

"I didn't say I heard it!" retorted Miss Grut.

"You saw it?"

"It made my television picture break up. The car engine wasn't properly suppressed or whatever they call it. That's against the law, of course, but for all the notice you policemen take . . . I was just sitting there watching this film when, all of a sudden, the entire screen broke up into a confusion of lines and squiggles and I don't know what. I looked at the clock to see what time it was because I should need that to put in my complaint. I was going to ask my nephew later who his visitor was so that I could report them to the Post Office or the B.B.C. or whoever it is. Well, the car engine was switched off and my television picture returned to normal, only to break up all over again when the car drove away some ten minutes later. Right, I thought to myself. Enough's enough! I'm not paying out a small fortune for a TV license every year just to have all my entertainment ruined by some selfish individual who won't spend a few pennies getting his car fixed properly. I know my rights!"

"But even if you're right," said MacGregor a trifle wearily, "and it was the murderer's car, it doesn't help us much. There must be thousands of cars running around that aren't properly suppressed."

Miss Grut's look of triumph was quite sickening. "This car belongs to somebody who was at Peter's wine-and-cheese party," she said firmly, brooking neither interruption nor argument. "There was precisely the same effect on my television picture when they were all driving away on Sunday afternoon. Precisely the same. One of the cars which had been parked outside this house yesterday afternoon wasn't properly suppressed."

"But there could easily be two unsuppressed cars," MacGregor pointed out when he was finally allowed to get a word in.

Miss Grut clamped her lips in an unyielding line and shook her head. "No. The pattern of the breakup was exactly the same in both cases. I was watching the cricket on Sunday afternoon," she added, as though that clinched matters. "So there you are! Find out which of my nephew's party guests is driving an unsuppressed car, and

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you've found your murderer. Of course, if that is a task beyond the capabilities of Scotland Yard I've no doubt I could track down the offending vehicle myself and thus do all your job for you."

MacGregor was beginning to feel that Miss Grut had got him pinned on the ropes, but help was at hand from a most unexpected quarter. Dover again bestirred himself. Apparently much refreshed and rested, he gazed almost benignly at the two protagonists. Miss Grut was the recipient of a most ingratiating leer as Dover made his most significant contribution to the investigation so far.

"How about a nice cup of coffee, eh?"

Miss Grut might have been expected to put up a stouter fight in the face of such blatant male piggery, but for some inexplicable reason she capitulated just like any ordinary, downtrodden, unemancipated female. "I'll go and get some," she said feebly.

"A few sandwiches wouldn't come amiss," Dover called after her. "And a bit of cake! We had an early start, you know." He turned his attention to MacGregor. "If you don't ask, you don't get," he explained with a grin.

"Really, sir."

Dover's grin widened. "She certainly made mince-meat out of you, laddie!"

"Silly old cow!" muttered MacGregor, and then felt ashamed of himself for descending to a level he had thought hitherto as fitting only for the Dovers of this world.

Dover surrendered himself to an enormous yawn. "It's not a bad theory," he said as his dentures clicked back into place.

"But not one, I'm afraid, sir, that would hold water for a minute."

"Says who?"

MacGregor tried not to sound too patronizing. After all, however low an opinion he held of Miss Grut as a detective, it was considerably higher than the one he held of Dover in the same role. "Well, take the gun, sir. The guests at the wine-and-cheese party may have been the only ones to know there was a gun and live ammunition here in the studio, but what's to stop the murderer being somebody else entirely who just used the gun to shoot Peter Zandarowski because it was to hand?"

Dover scratched his head. "Sort of unpremeditated?"

"Perhaps. Or the murderer may have brought his own weapon with him, seen the gun, and realized it was a better bet."

"Hm," grunted Dover, who found all this theorizing very taxing on the brain.

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"And there is, of course, sir, absolutely nothing to connect this car Miss Grut claims called here last night with the murder."

"Time's right," observed Dover. "According to what the police surgeon said."

MacGregor was surprised to find that Dover had actually been listening when the police surgeon made his report, but naturally he refrained from commenting on the point. "That was only a preliminary estimate, sir," he said. "The time of death could be considerably altered by the post-mortem. You see, apart from the fact that Miss Grut might simply be lying, the only evidence for the existence of this car is the TV interference. Well, that could be caused by anything, couldn't it? Trouble at the transmitter or an airplane or a piece of faulty electrical equipment here in the house. I've known an electric razor to break up a television picture. There may well not have been any car at all, and certainly not one belonging to one of the guests at the wine-and-cheese party."

Dover, one ear cocked to the rumblings of his stomach, regarded his sergeant with loathing. Whatever MacGregor's opinion was of Dover, it was returned ten times and in spades. Self-opinionated little squirt! "It'll have to be checked," he warned.

"Oh, of course, sir!" MacGregor was nothing if not extremely conscientious. Well, in that unholy partnership it was as well that somebody was. "The whole story will have to be meticulously investigated."

Dover yawned again and scratched his stomach. "So you'd better get cracking."

"Sir?"

"I'll make your excuses to Miss What's-her-name," promised Dover happily, thus converting his mid-morning coffee break into quite a substantial meal as he munched greedily through MacGregor's share of the goodies.

Miss Grut herself didn't seem to have much of an appetite. They took their refreshments in the studio as Dover was not the man to indulge in unnecessary movement, so it may have been the presence of the chalked outline of her nephew's dead body that put Miss Grut off her food. On the other hand, it may simply have been the appalling spectacle of Dover with both feet in the feeding trough which turned her queasy.

However, all good things must come to an end—especially when they're being gulped down by one of Nature's gluttons—and it wasn't long before Dover was reduced to staring nostalgically at an array

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of empty plates and cups. He sighed deeply and turned to Miss Grut.

Miss Grut steeled herself to repulse the long-awaited assault on her innocence. She had now got Dover's measure. All this belching and lip-smacking, guzzling and gobbling—it was all part of an act designed to lull intended victims into a false sense of superiority. Well, Miss Grut had seen through it. Indeed, she was actually mildly contemptuous of the way Dover had been overplaying his hand during the coffee-and-cake episode. Now she was ready for anything.

Dover spoke—and the kid gloves came off with a vengeance. "You got a toilet down here, missis?"

Miss Grut was never the same woman again. In a stunned silence she conducted her unwanted guest to the downstairs loo and then returned to the studio. For the first time in her life she was unsure what to do next. Should she return to her own quarters at the back of the house? Phone for a solicitor? Or smash that damned coffee pot into smithereens on the floor?

It was some time before Dover emerged. "That's the bloody trouble with coffee," he observed chattily as he waddled back to his chair, "it goes right through you."

Miss Grut struggled to retain control over her shattered nerves. Dear heavens, she had thought her late nephew was the ne plus ultra of male chauvinism, but this nasty, unspeakable brute of a policeman . . . "Will you be needing me any longer?" she inquired distantly. "There are quite a lot of things that I ought to be . . ."

But Dover was in one of his gregarious moods and Miss Grut's company was marginally better than his own. "Artist, you said?" he queried conversationally while peering around to see if there were any cigarettes going begging.

"A commercial artist, yes."

"That's why he's got the walls of the bog out there all covered with picture postcards, is it?" asked Dover. "Sort of artistic?"

"Yes," said Miss Grut, who thought the décor of the downstairs lavatory little short of an abomination.

"Suppose it comes cheaper than wallpaper," mused Dover, sadly coming to the conclusion that Peter Zandarowski had been one of those skinflint nonsmokers who don't keep any for their friends. "Or tiles."

"I think it was meant to be some sort of Bohemian joke," said Miss Grut thinly.

Dover began to think about his lunch. "There's one missing," he observed idly as he tried to weigh up his chances of getting a post-

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prandial drink out of Miss Grut. "It must have dropped off."

Miss Grut's face hardened. She might disapprove of the smallest room in the house being papered with picture postcards, but she disapproved even more strongly of it being disfigured. After all, the entire house was now her property. Without a word she turned on her heel and stormed off to investigate.

When she returned her face was black with fury. "It's sheer vandalism!" she raged. "Really, some people are beyond belief! It was somebody at that party, you know. Fancy prizing off a postcard like that, right in the middle of the back wall. It looks terrible. You see it missing the moment you enter the room. I shall have to find another one to replace it until I can get the whole room re-decorated. I wonder if Peter kept any spare postcards in here . . ." She moved over to a filing cabinet and began rummaging through it.

"Saucy, was it?" inquired Dover with a leer. "One for the connoisseur, eh? I noticed some of the others were a bit on the naughty side."

"No, it wasn't!" Miss Grut was opening and shutting drawers with increasing speed. "It was a very pretty card and a most unusual one. An Italian girl in peasant costume. The top of her was just an ordinary picture, but her skirt was made with real embroidery silk. It was lovely!" She tossed her head angrily. "Isn't that just like people? They choose the only really beautiful card in the entire room to vandalize. They couldn't take one of the ordinary cards, could they? Oh, no, they have to steal the best. That card must have cost the earth and it came all the way from Italy. I remember noticing the stamp."

Dover didn't usually waste his time on detective work but, caught in that unhappy No Man's Land between morning coffee and lunch, he'd nothing much else to do. "Can you remember who sent it?"

Miss Grut drew herself up to her full height. "I am not in the habit of reading other people's postcards!"

Dover's pasty face split into an evil grin. "Now pull the other one!" he invited.

"Well, it wasn't signed, if you must know," said Miss Grut, succumbing to the temptation to reveal all. "Well, only with a row of crosses, and we all know what they mean. Disgusting!"

Dover waited.

"The message was something like: 'Wish you were here! Especially at bedtime! Hope this finds you as it leaves me at present—in the pink!' Well, one doesn't have to be a university professor to work

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that out! Fancy sending such obscene filth through the post!" Miss Grut gave a *frisson* of exquisite horror, and abandoning her search for a replacement postcard, gathered up the dirty coffee cups. She then swept majestically out of the studio and left Dover to his own devices.

It was MacGregor who eventually woke him up.

Dover took a few seconds to recollect where he was and MacGregor was able to take advantage of this hiatus to make his report. Everything was naturally well in hand. The Traffic police had been alerted and were standing by, prepared to check the suppressors on any car that the men from Scotland Yard might designate. Most of the people who had attended the wine-and-cheese party had been contacted and told to hold themselves in readiness for a visit that very afternoon from no less a person than Detective Chief Inspector Wilfred Dover himself.

" 'Strewth!" said Dover, apparently appalled at the prospect which lay before him. He made a gallant effort to gather his wits. "Here, what time is it?"

MacGregor's long and grueling association with Dover enabled him to find the correct answer to that question. "They've laid on a hot meal for us at the pub down the road, sir."

A repast consisting of tomato soup, steak and kidney pie with chips and two veg, a double helping of roly-poly pudding and custard, and cheese and biscuits is not, perhaps, the ideal foundation for an afternoon's cerebral work but, all things considered, Dover stood up to the ordeal quite well. Nobody was actually able to swear he wasn't just resting his eyes against the light.

As the afternoon wore on, MacGregor felt that his initial pessimism was being fully justified. They were getting nowhere fast. None of the suspects—if that's what they really were—showed the slightest sign of fulfilling every detective's dream by coughing up a nice full and free confession.

Old Dr. Horncastle was in such a state of decrepitude that one glance was enough to clear him of all suspicion of being either a car driver or a murderer. His daughter Perlita, on the other hand, was a Jehu of some local notoriety, but she was also a keen bridge player and could produce a solid alibi for the whole of Sunday evening. She managed to run quite a strong promotional campaign for Spooky Chesshire as the murderess on the grounds that that particular overblown tart was both a raving sexpot and the niece of a man

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who'd been put on probation once for persistent indecent exposure.

Dover held his fire until just before Perlita Horncastle closed the door on him and MacGregor. The answer he got to his question was accompanied by a short and bitter laugh. Holiday? Perlita Horncastle hadn't had a holiday for five years and probably wouldn't for the next five if she couldn't find somebody to look after her father while she was away.

MacGregor was still trying to work out what Dover was getting at as he confronted Mrs. Barclay-Rhys in the stronghold of her chintz-draped drawing room. On this occasion the lady was accompanied by her husband, and since he was an experienced and successful solicitor, her responses to MacGregor's questions were unhelpfully monosyllabic. She did once begin to hint that Miss Joanie Wisbey, having recently been dropped by Peter Zandarowski, might be the one they were looking for, but a steely glare from Mr. Barclay-Rhys shut her up smartly.

Dover's feet were beginning to hurt and he tried to prolong the interview by asking Mrs. Barclay-Rhys how she had got to the wine-and-cheese party. It emerged that she had come on foot.

"Don't you drive?"

Mr. Barclay-Rhys smoothly stuck his oar in. Yes, Mrs. Barclay-Rhys did drive, was an excellent driver in fact, but as Mr. Barclay-Rhys had just taken possession of a brand-new Jaguar . . . well, it was hardly a ladies' car, was it?

Lady Tisdale was the next on the list, and Dover was flagging. Lady Tisdale, too, had a husband in attendance, though he wasn't hers. She had, she announced, flashing a roguish eye at her three male suitors, a complete alibi for the whole of Sunday afternoon, evening, and night, but she would only produce it if actually confronted with the gallows. "In these enlightened days," said Lady Tisdale, "the least we women can do is behave like gentlemen."

Dover's sordid little attempt to cut this noble female down to size fell on particularly stony ground. You don't bring a blush to the cheeks of the Lady Tisdales of this world by asking them if they paid a visit to the loo during the course of Peter Zandarowski's wine-and-cheese party. Lady Tisdale had not paid such a visit, and said so without fear or favor.

"Oh, 'strewth," whined Dover as he limped down Lady Tisdale's garden path, "enough's enough!"

MacGregor was inclined to agree, especially after Dover's last contribution to the investigation, but he knew that speed was of the

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essence in murder cases. "Just one more, sir," he wheedled, "and then we'll stop for tea."

Regrettably, it soon became evident that the Chesshires weren't giving anything at all away, not even a pot of the brew that cheers but does not inebriate. They had seen nothing, heard nothing, and knew nothing. Frightfully sorry. Alibis? Well, to be perfectly honest, they'd both made a jolly early night of it, retiring to bed with hot-water bottles, Alka Seltzers, and sleeping pills.

"When we got back home after that wine-and-cheese party," confided Spooky Chesshire, "I was literally as sick as a dog. Wasn't I, Rodney? I'm still feeling horribly queasy."

"She threw up all over the bathroom floor," Rodney informed MacGregor earnestly. "And if I hadn't got the innards of a camel, I'd probably have done the jolly old same. *De mortuis* and all that rot, but old Peter did serve up some amazingly nasty plonk. Pity he wasn't poisoned, eh? Otherwise we could have told you exactly where to look."

One might have expected Dover to take an intelligent interest in a clinical discussion of this nature as he was something of an expert when it came to the malfunctioning of the human digestive system, but he didn't. He merely sat there, wrapped in gloom, while MacGregor plodded patiently through his list of routine questions. Nothing of interest was elicited, and since no invitation to tea was forthcoming, Dover prepared to cut his losses.

He didn't want the Chesshires to think, though, that they'd been let off the hook entirely. "You understand that these are only preliminary inquiries," he said when he was already out on the doorstep and his hosts thought they had seen the last of him. "We shall be pursuing our investigations in more detail when the results of various tests are to hand."

"Ah!" said Rodney Chesshire brightly. "You mean the ballistics report and the jolly old post-mortem and what-have-you?"

Dover scowled. This blooming case was littered with clever devils trying to teach him how to suck eggs. "You just see you hold yourself in readiness, mate!" he advised as unpleasantly as he could. "No trying to skip the country!"

"Shouldn't you confiscate our passports?" asked Spooky Chesshire helpfully. "Not that we're likely to be going anywhere. No cash! Besides, we've already had our trip abroad for this year."

Dover now seemed anxious to prolong the conversation. "Oh, yes?" he said. "Where did you go?"

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"We had a fortnight in Amalfi," cooed Spooky, rolling her big blue eyes in ecstatic reminiscence. "*Simply* gorgeous!" She slipped her arms through her husband's. "Wasn't it, darling?"

Dover waited until he and MacGregor were back in the police car. "Where the hell's Amalfi?" he demanded.

"In Italy, sir." MacGregor was feeling very apprehensive. Surely a steaming idiot like Dover hadn't spotted something he'd missed? "South of Rome. Why, is it important, sir?"

Dover leaned forward and poked the police driver in the back of the neck. "Any chance of getting some tea down at your nick, laddie?"

The startled police driver reckoned that there was and was instructed to proceed to the local police station with all possible speed.

"While I'm having a cuppa," Dover told MacGregor, "you can see about getting the warrant."

"Warrant, sir?" howled MacGregor, his worst fears realized. "Who for?"

"That snooty beggar in there. Who else?"

"Rodney Chesshire, sir? But what's he done?"

"Murdered Who's-your-father, of course! 'Strewth, what's the matter with you? A kid of two could have worked that out. Look," Dover said, generously willing to explain his methods to the less gifted, "that chap who was croaked used to decorate the walls of his downstairs toilet with the picture postcards his friends sent him."

"Really?" said MacGregor weakly.

"One of the guests at that blooming wine-and-cheese party on the day of the murder went to the lavatory and removed one of the postcards."

MacGregor licked his lips. "I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, sir."

"Thank God for small mercies!" sniggered Dover before returning to more serious matters. "Look, the dead man—"

"Peter Zandarowski, sir!"

"—was a notorious womanizer, right? Well, what would you do if you found your missus had sent him a postcard with a very suggestive message on the back of it?"

"Sir, I really—"

"Peter What's-his-name's auntie remembers the postcard because it was some sort of special one from Italy. She also remembers the message on the back. It was unsigned, of course, but Derbyshire would recognize his own wife's handwriting, same as he recognized

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that very distinctive type of postcard when he saw it on the wall."

To his eternal credit MacGregor really tried to straighten all this out. "Do you mean, sir, that you're proposing to arrest Mr. Chesshire on the strength of a picture postcard which, if I understand you, you've not actually seen?"

Dover didn't take such petty nit-picking well. " 'Strewth, there's a gap on the wall where the postcard was nicked from. Somebody at the party took it. You're not going to argue about that, are you?"

"But that doesn't mean Chesshire took it, sir."

"The card came from Italy! His wife must have sent it."

MacGregor forced himself to be both generous and fair. "Even supposing you're right about the missing postcard, sir, somebody else other than Chesshire could have removed it from the wall."

"But nobody else other than Chesshire would have then gone on and shot Peter Thingummyjig, would they?" demanded Dover, the end of his tether now in sight.

"Several of Zandarowski's lady friends were at that party, sir. Any one of them might have read the postcard and killed him out of jealousy. Hell hath no fury like a—"

"Listen, laddie!" snarled Dover, resenting MacGregor's tone of superiority. "You're talking through the back of your head as usual. It's got to be a man who murdered What's-his-name because it's got to be a man who pulled that postcard off his downstairs lavatory wall. Savvy? Well, there were only three men at the party and we can scrub that old fool of a doctor and it can't be this sixteen-year-old boy either, can it? Apart from anything else, neither of 'em can drive a bloody car. So that leaves Yorkshire, doesn't it? Well, you just get up off your backside and get somebody round to check his car. If it's capable of causing television interference, we've got him bloody cold."

MacGregor was not far from tears. "You're accepting Miss Grut's evidence about the car on Sunday night, sir?"

"She'll be rock-solid in the witness box," claimed Dover, sitting back and rubbing his hands. "You'll not get her to change her testimony, not in a month of Sundays. In fact"—he lowered his voice so that the police driver shouldn't hear more than was good for him—"she'll be such a good witness that it might be worthwhile making sure Shropshire's car is unsuppressed. Get the idea? It probably won't involve doing more than pulling an odd bit of wire loose."

MacGregor had long since passed the stage when he was going to get upset about being asked to fabricate evidence. "I still don't see,

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sir," he insisted with dogged determination, "how you can be so certain that the postcard—if there was a postcard—was removed by a man. In my opinion—"

" 'Strewth!" exploded Dover. "You're as thick as two bloody planks, you are. That postcard was stuck at eye level on the back wall of the loo, right over the cistern. Get it? Well, that's precisely where it would catch a man's eye as he was standing there, isn't it? But women don't stand, laddie! They sit, and they sit facing the other way. Now do you see? It's a million-to-one chance that a woman would notice that postcard because it would be well above her head and she'd have her back to it." Dover eyed his sergeant speculatively. "I should have thought even you knew that much about the facts of life, laddie!"

"But—"

"But nothing!" said Dover, who was getting bored with the whole thing. "Wiltshire recognizes the postcard, reads it, discovers his wife's been two-timing him with What's-his-name, knocks her out with a sleeping pill when they come home from the party, drives back, and shoots Who's-your-father, and—if it hadn't been for me—he'd have bloody well got away with it, wouldn't he?"

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"Six males, an indeterminate number of females, about a half-dozen calves, Muzakere had said. In this day and age that was a lot of elephants" . . .

THE BIG IVORY

by VICTOR MILÁN

The hunters follow the big ivory. That's where the money is.

It was a big herd—even an outlander like me could tell. The grass was still flattened from their passage, the yellow mud around the waterhole churned as though by an artillery barrage. Six males, an indeterminate number of females, about a half-dozen calves, Muzakere had said. In this day and age that was a lot of elephants.

I scanned the horizon with my binoculars. The herd had moved on some time since, off toward the river. I had quite a distance to go to catch up with them.

It didn't matter. I had plenty of time.

Or so I thought. Then I caught sight of something that told me otherwise.

Tracks again. They were broad swaths like those left by the lumbering elephants, but within them ran twin serrated lines as though two giant snakes were traveling up them side by side. Tire marks.

I climbed into the Landcruiser and drove to where I'd seen the tracks. There was no mistake. Land Rovers, two of them. Following the herd, perhaps a few hours ahead of me.

I didn't have so much time after all.

A bird cried from a lonely, flat-topped acacia that stood shading the mudhole. I got back into the Toyota and let in the clutch. I set out following the two disparate sets of tracks, slowly, so that my engine noise wouldn't spook my quarry.

I remembered the village, two days before. The East African heat had barely been relieved by the small table fan that blew from one corner of the room, riffling the papers on Muzakere's desk. He'd rested a hard black hand on them casually, holding them down.

"There aren't many herds like this one left," he said. "I saw them

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myself a fortnight ago. The leader is the largest bull I've ever seen. He must be four meters tall at the shoulder."

I nodded, trying to envision such a monster. He'd carry a phenomenal weight of ivory, that always-valuable substance that was becoming daily more precious as the only sources for it died off in the face of progress. Just one such creature would draw the ivory poachers like lions to a fresh zebra carcass.

Muzakere was looking at me. There was no friendliness in his gaze. I waited.

"When we achieved our independence," he said at last, speaking in the perfect clipped tones of an English-educated young African, "we believed we were through with you people. But now you come to slaughter our wild animals and speed them on their way to extinction." He looked as if he wanted to spit.

"Most of your emerging nations don't give a damn for the wildlife," I said. "They look at it as an inconvenience to be gotten rid of. The animals are killed off because they carry diseases that threaten cattle, the preserves become factories, cities, agricultural land. Conservation's considered a vestige of colonialism."

His expression told me what he thought of that. He was a young, intense man, not much older than me, handsome as a statue. In his own turn he was studying me, trying to read me.

I let him look. I was dressed in my own style—southwestern American—which suited this climate quite well. The vee between his brows deepened as he glanced at the heavy Ruger Blackhawk revolver hung butt-forward on my right hip. I could almost hear him think: *damned American cowboy*. Most of the poachers were British or white Africans. The thought of a new nationality coming in to massacre the animals he was charged with protecting didn't make him happy.

"You have your orders," I said quietly.

He nodded. "Yes." With bitterness. "I do."

I knew what he thought: some official high up in the interior ministry had been bought with American dollars so that yet another white-skinned hunter could walk a quick path to riches. And bring the elephant that much nearer oblivion. It caused him pain, this one. He really cared.

Let him, I thought. *Let him think whatever he wants to.* I rose to go.

"One thing," he said. He pushed back from the desk and rose, sucking his lips in pensively. The breeze peeled off the top sheet of

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paper he'd been anchoring down with his hand. It fluttered across the room. He ignored it.

"I saw your rifle. Out in your vehicle."

He seemed reluctant, so I prodded him. "And?"

"It is a Remington .300 magnum."

"So?"

He paused, then shook his head disgustedly. "You can kill an elephant with one, if you're good. But it's a gun for zebra or eland—or leopard, perhaps. It wouldn't stop a bull like this patriarch in a charge."

"It's a damn sight easier on my shoulder than one of these .577 cannons. I'm a specialist. I use the tools that suit me."

His face tautened. Why had he told me? I wondered. Perhaps he had the peculiarly British notion of exercising fair play even with those one despises. Or maybe he was hoping to goad my American *machismo* into making me face the old and mighty bull close up and get trampled flat.

"Thanks for your concern, anyway," I said.

"Get out of here," he said.

I made camp that night in the midst of an endless rippling of tawny grass. Out of some urge doubtless springing from my own arboreal ancestry I pulled the white Cruiser up into the lee of the single tree in sight. I cooked some tasteless foil-wrapped rations on a Coleman stove, not wanting to send up smoke in case anyone was watching, and afterward made myself some tea.

I sat on the hood of the Toyota, sipping, watching the sun sink and the sky go red. The grassland started to come alive around me as the day faded and myriad animals woke to greet the night. So did the bugs, unfortunately. As soon as the sky had shaded through purple and indigo and was starting in on starshot black, I unrolled my sleeping bag in the back of the Landcruiser—no use in tempting any of those leopards Muzakere had mentioned—and draped mosquito netting over windows half open for ventilation. The local fauna might not have qualified as a flight of angels, but their sounds sang me to my rest well enough.

Morning was early. The other party would be up with the sun, the natives gathering up the camp things and packing them into the Rovers, the white hunters rechecking rifles and ammunition, feeling the pulse-quickening that said there'd be a kill today.

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I felt a bit of that myself as I sipped my morning coffee.

The herd was making for a nearby river—stream, rather—that ran through a great shallow depression in the land. The group of hunters was following them at what I judged would be a careful distance. They probably hoped for the elephants to be occupied with drinking and bathing when they came in range.

Luck was with them and me. The wind was right in our faces. Those trunks are acutely sensitive olfactory apparatuses as well as the most versatile manipulatory members evolution has produced on this planet. And no bull ever got as big and old as that patriarch without becoming ever so wary of man scent. If the wind blew wrong the herd would bolt, and that would put a stop to the day's hunting.

Unless, of course, somebody happened to be in charging range of the big bull when the wind went foul. In spite of what Muzakere said, I didn't think even a .600 would be much help then.

The map and the gradual rise of the land told me I was getting near the broad bowl. I stopped the Toyota and sat listening. I couldn't hear the growl of other engines. A good sign? We'd see.

It was afoot from here on. I didn't want either the elephants or the other hunters to hear me. If the animals were at the stream the only thing that had kept them from hearing me already was the fold of ground between us.

Flies strafed me as I got out and unzipped my Remington from its case. Everything seemed in order. Bouncing over the landscape might have thrown the scope off, but I sure as hell was in no position to fire off a few rounds to sight it in. I'd been through this before, though. I felt fairly confident.

I fed the magazine full of cartridges. Then I filled my canteen from the tank behind the driver's seat, closed and locked the Landcruiser, and set out after my prey.

I'd diverged from the tracks of the elephants and those who followed them a few kilometers back. I guessed the others had left their vehicles well around the curve of the circular depression to walk in on the animals. When I crested the rise I found I was right. There was no sign of the bulky, broad-shouldered Land Rovers, but perhaps 2000 meters away was a small clump of figures moving steadily down toward the stream. The hunters.

I looked to the stream. They were there, all right. Almost 20 of them. And the patriarch. Muzakere hadn't been mistaken about him. He was the biggest creature I'd ever seen outside the dinosaur room of the Smithsonian. Four, maybe four and a half meters at the

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shoulder, and the tusks coming out of his mouth like white and twisted bowsprits from the wreck of an ancient sailing ship. A record breaker. It would be a shame for such magnificence to die.

Still, there was the lure of that ivory. That big ivory.

I started moving down, rifle slung and bumping against my rump. In my rising excitement I didn't give the discomfort much thought. They looked like vreat, gray children, playing in that brown and greasy water. I've never got over the feeling of sheer power they exude. I felt five and small and taken to the zoo again, watching those monolithic beasts.

I quickened my pace. The other hunters were getting close to what they'd probably consider fair range—long enough for some margin of safety, short enough for the fat slugs from their expresses to stagger the giants. Time pressed on me like deep water. I didn't want to allow them first shot.

I was farther away than I liked when they stopped and started to position themselves. We'd been following gradually converging courses whose nexus was the herd. I was still 500 meters from the elephants, the hunters about 300 from the animals and 400 from me.

I sat, unslinging the Remington, bringing it to shoulder and elbows to knees, forcing myself to breathe with deliberation. No use letting myself get flustered. I couldn't afford to fluff a shot.

I brought my cheek near the gleaming receiver and peered through the Bausch & Lomb. I saw a mother and child playfully splashing water on each other. There was something almost human about their easy affection.

The rifle traversed till I saw him, the bull. God, he was huge. My breath caught in my throat as I watched him. He looked like a mountain about to fall on me.

The crosshairs aligned themselves as if by their own accord on his wrinkle-circled right eye. He seemed to be gazing at me. He was aloof, unafraid, as if aware I was there and disdainful of my power to hurt him.

Time was short. I swung the rifle again, dizzily upslope, till the figures of men appeared.

There were two whites, in typical khaki bush clothes and wide-brimmed hats, and six or seven natives in loose trousers and shirts. I was cutting it fine. The older of the whites had his rifle halfway to the ready, squinting at the elephants as if to fix their location in his mind. Once he opened fire he'd have to fire fast to get more than

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one before the rest fled out of range. Though his range would be long—my eyes widened as I recognized his weapon.

I'd never actually seen one—a World War II German bolt action antitank rifle, 12.5 mm and rechambered to take a .50 caliber machinegun cartridge. Heavy artillery. He had three of the enormous shells in the cartridge loops on his left breast.

His every move and gesture was that of a professional, a cold, steady, Hemingwayesque hero in his own eyes and those of the world. The other white hung back; younger, he seemed to defer to the man. His own gun was a standard twin-bore Rigby .577.

The .50 came up to a solid shoulder. The time had come. With something like regret I brought the crosshairs onto my own target, inhaled, let it out slowly, squeezed.

The Remington slammed me and the barrel kicked up. I gave way, then leaned forward and lined up the scope in time to see the bullet hit.

The Hemingway type was doing an oddly balletic spin and fall, the rifle dropping from his hands. My slug had bored under his right arm, through lung and heart and out. As calmly as I could, I ejected the spent shell and chambered another round.

The elephants were alerted, trumpeting their alarm. I had no time for them. I centered the crosshairs on the pallid face of the younger hunter, staring in horror at his fallen idol.

The second report left my ears ringing like a carillon. Red mist exploded behind his head. He dropped like a string-snipped marionette as the bearers fled.

I looked at the stream. The herd was in full flight now, all except for the big aged bull. He stood knee-deep in water, facing me, trunk upraised in challenge. I waved to him, though his squinted old eyes doubtless couldn't make me out. *Go in peace, old one,* I thought. *I've no business with you now.*

You see, not *all* emerging African nations care nothing about their endangered native wildlife. Some of them have been fighting the poachers for a long, long time. And some of them have realized the only way to counter the poachers' greed is to appeal to the greed of others. So they offer bounties. Good ones.

The poachers come from all around. Lots of them. They follow the big ivory.

And me, I follow them.

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a *NEW* 'tec take-off by

JON L. BREEN

This time Jon L. Breen, our premier parody-pasticher, aims the point of his pen at one of the favorite series characters in EQMM—Edward D. Hoch's Dr. Sam Hawthorne. The subtitle of Mr. Breen's little fun-poker reads: "A Chapter from the Memoirs of Dr. Sid Shoehorn, New England General Practitioner." And now let the drips (of ink) fall where they may . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE VANISHING TOWN

by JON L. BREEN

"The roaring twenties, did you say?" said Dr. Sid Shoehorn. "Oh, yes, I guess they called 'em the roaring twenties all right. But I don't remember doing much roaring as a small-town New England doctor. Not much ever happened in Northsouth at all, and most of what I did was just everyday doctoring–taking temperatures and giving out pills and suchlike. I remember the summer of 1928–but I see you've finished your–ah–small libation. Here, let me pour you another" . . .

Now the summer of 1928 (Dr. Sid went on) was just another small-town summer. The old firehorse Bootsie walked into the firehouse one day and vanished completely from sight. That created a bit of a stir. Then the public library disappeared overnight–yes, one morning folks just found a big vacant lot where the library had been. That was just a publicity stunt on the part of the librarian, though, protesting budget cuts. Librarians are a militant lot, you know. She put it back the next night.

There was an old fellow passed through town named Noah Zark who claimed he was 2000 years old and challenged the Devil to a

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duel in the middle of the town square right in front of the war memorial. He was run through with a pitchfork that came out of nowhere in full view of more than a hundred people, none of them within 20 feet of him. Pretty flashy, huh? It did a little to liven up a pleasantly dull Northsouth summer.

The whole local Grange was wiped out in a hermetically sealed grain elevator that summer. Folks were mighty sad about that. And . . . I'm not boring you, am I, sonny? Oh, I didn't see your glass was empty. Let me just pour you another–ah–small libation here. And I told you, didn't I, about the clown from the circus who was mauled by a lion on the fifth floor of the Northsouth Hotel when the lion was in his cage five blocks away. That was kind of interesting.

On the whole, though, it was just a quiet, typical small-town nineteen-twenties summer. Not roaring at all. Except the lion, of course. I guess the most interesting thing that happened, and the thing I wanted to tell you about, was the day in late August that the whole town of Northsouth plumb disappeared from the map. So let me just fill up your glass again and I'll tell you all about it. Get comfortable now.

That morning I had been on a call some miles outside of town. We doctors made house calls in those days routinely. I'd delivered a set of triplets in a farmhouse and stopped off to see to a case of the black plague on my way back to town. It seemed like just an ordinary day. But when I returned to my office, my nurse told me that Sheriff Aperture wanted to see me right away.

"That's funny," I mused. "The sheriff doesn't often get sick."

Walking to the sheriff's office, I must have said good morning to a couple of dozen people. You know how small towns are–everybody knows everybody else. There was Fred, the kid who worked at the soda fountain in the drug store. As always, he was reading a pulp magazine–not something respectable like *Black Mask* but one of those things with monsters and rocket ships on the front. Nobody thought Fred would ever amount to much, but he was always pleasant.

"Goin' to see the sheriff, Dr. Sid?" he said.

"Well, yes, Fred," I admitted. "But how'd you know?"

He just smirked. Hardly worth asking. In a small town everybody knows your business somehow.

"I can hardly wait till three o'clock," he said.

"What's happening at three o'clock, Fred?"

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"You'll find out."

I just shrugged and walked on. Next I ran into somebody I hadn't seen in months, Sinclair "Tex" Flackman. He was a public-relations man for one of the oil companies. A few months before, after a long struggle, they had been denied permission to drill for oil in downtown Northsouth.

"Hello there, Tex," I said. "How you been?"

"Fair enough, all things considered, Dr. Sid."

"You still with the oil company?"

"Nope. I got fired just last week. It had been coming a long time, but I think it started when I failed to get you folks here in Northsouth to see things the oil company's way."

"Well, Tex, I hope you don't have hard feelings toward the people of Northsouth."

"Oh, no. You folks just lost me my job is all. But why would I be coming back to town if I held anything against you?"

That was a good question. In fact, why would he anyway? Northsouth is a nice place to live but not so much to visit, and I don't think Sinclair "Tex" Flackman made any lasting friendships here.

"Well, I gotta move on, Doc. I want to be sure and get out of town by three o'clock."

"Why three o'clock?"

"I got business elsewhere then, that's all," he said, with a smirk a lot like Fred's.

About a block away from the sheriff's office was the new radio station that had just started up in Northsouth that summer. As usual, when he saw me coming, the general manager of the station had to run out and have a word with me.

"Mornin', Dave," I said. "How you been keeping?"

"Just fine, Doc. Have you thought any more about that proposition of mine?"

"Yes, I've given it some thought, Dave," I said. Ever since he got in town, he'd been after me to sell him the radio dramatic rights to my life and all the little mysteries I'd had a hand in solving. I didn't see much future in radio plays and tried to put him off as gently as I could. "I'm afraid I can't do it. You see, it would be a form of advertising for me to be on the radio, even with an actor playing me, and advertising is not considered ethical for a doctor to do."

"Dr. Sid, in a couple of years I could have you on every big station in the country. You'd make enough money to quit doctoring for a living."

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"I just don't want to do that, Dave," I told him. What I didn't tell him was that I figured in another 40 or 50 years I could sell my memoirs to a mystery magazine for lots more money than I could make out of an uncertain proposition like radio.

"Well, I'm surely disappointed. This thing that's happening at three this afternoon would make a terrific opening episode in the series, if only–"

"Just what is going to happen at three o'clock this afternoon?" I asked, with some exasperation.

"You haven't heard? Then you better get down to Sheriff Aperture's office and he'll tell you all about it."

"That's just where I was headed," I said, and walked on.

Sheriff Aperture was a big man whose name fitted him because he had a face just like a camera. He was a good enough sheriff for most purposes, but sometimes I thought he was working with his lens cap still on.

"Now, Doc," he said, "first thing I want to say is, don't tell anybody about what I'm going to tell you. I don't want a panic in my town, and if everybody heard about what was going to happen at three this afternoon, a panic is just what would happen."

"You haven't told anybody yet, Sheriff?"

"A few select people, but only those I knew I could trust."

"Like Fred at the drug store, and Dave at the radio station, and Sinclair 'Tex' Flackman?"

"That's a few of 'em. I just had to tell somebody, Doc. This isn't the kind of a thing a man can keep inside him."

"Sheriff, the longer we talk, the closer it gets to three. Now just what is supposed to happen then?"

Sheriff Aperture mopped his brow and dropped into his swivel chair. "I got a telephone call this morning from somebody that said that at three o'clock this afternoon the whole town of Northsouth will disappear from the map. The whole town, Doc! I plumb don't see how a whole town can be made to disappear."

"Don't forget the public library."

"Yeah, but that was just one building."

"Sometimes it's easier to make a big thing disappear than a little one, Sheriff. And I agree that you can't afford to take any chances on your whole town vanishing."

"Not with the election coming up I can't."

"Do you have any ideas, Sheriff? What precautions have you taken?"

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"Well, Doc, the first thing I thought of was that somebody might use mirrors on us."

"Mirrors?"

"Yeah. You remember that fella passed through town last year trying to sell us all on–what was it called? Solar heating, that was it. And he said he'd use these giant mirrors to do it, to gather the power from the sun. Everybody laughed at him, of course, and he wasn't too happy about it."

"So you think he could make the town disappear with mirrors to get revenge on us all?"

"If he put his giant mirrors in front of all the buildings on the road through town, anyone passing through wouldn't see the town. It would kill all our business. What do you think?"

"Well, he couldn't fool anybody for long, Sheriff. And we could just take down the mirrors. Now if he put the mirrors on top of all the buildings, it might fool a pilot passing overhead in an airplane. It would be a tough job to do, though, without anyone seeing him. And can you think of any reason anybody might want to mislead a pilot?"

"Nope. But anyway, I have orders out to my deputies to bring in anybody seen with a mirror larger than pocket-sized."

I shrugged. "If you think it's worthwhile. Doing anything else?"

"Well, I'm lookin' for suspicious-looking painters."

"Painters?"

"Sure. I figure somebody might try to paint all the buildings with some kind of special invisibility paint, make the town invisible."

"Is there such a paint, Sheriff? It sounds like something Fred at the drug store would read in one of his 'scientifiction' magazines."

"Well," the sheriff admitted, "it was Fred that suggested it."

"Even if there was a paint like that, it would take an awful long time to paint all the buildings."

Sheriff Aperture sighed, like a man carrying a weight that was much too heavy for him. "I guess so. Another thing I'm recommending is that nobody leave town. I don't see how a town can vanish if all the people are in it. But somebody might try a ruse on us to get everybody outside of town–an epidemic scare, maybe, or a flood coming. Anyway, I'm not leaving town today, I can tell you that."

"That may be just what somebody wants, Sheriff," I said. "Somebody may be planning a crime for just outside the town limits, figuring this 'vanishing town' threat will keep you right here and

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away from where the real action is. It's what magicians call misdirection."

"Doggone it, Doc! I can't be everywhere at once. And if I stepped out of town and came back and found it gone, I'd be the laughingstock of my profession. What would they say at the next Sheriffs Convention in Atlantic City if I went and did that? I ask you!"

While the sheriff was moaning and groaning, I was thinking. Finally I said, "I wouldn't worry, Sheriff. There's no way of actually making a whole town vanish. There might be ways of making us *think* it vanished."

"That could be just as bad. Doc, I'm at my wits' end."

I wanted to point out that was not a long-distance journey, but I don't hold with ridiculing public servants. After a moment more of cogitating I said, "Sheriff, I think I may see what's going on here, but I have a few things to do to make sure I'm right. Will you meet me at Gordy's Gas Station at three o'clock?"

"Gordy's Gas Station? Why?" He looked suspicious. "That's a little far from the center of town, Doc."

"It's inside the city limits. And if you're closer to the edge when the town starts vanishing, you'll be in a better position to see where it's going."

"Oh, all right," said Sheriff Aperture, a bit dubiously.

When I arrived at Gordy's Gas Station just before three, there were more people waiting for me than I expected. Fred from the drug store was there, the ever-present pulp magazine in his hands but holding his attention less firmly than usual. Dave from the radio station was there, and he'd set up some kind of microphone in the office. I'd have to talk to him about that. And Gordy was in the act of filling up with gas a car driven by Sinclair "Tex" Flackman. The sheriff was pacing in front of the office looking at his watch.

I nodded to Flackman. "Thought you'd have left town by now, Tex."

"No," he said, "I decided to wait and see the excitement. Thought it might be too good to miss. A guy whose career is going the way mine is might not mind vanishing anyway."

"I see you don't hold any grudge against your former employer." Gordy's station was affiliated with the Disassociated Oil Company, Flackman's former firm.

"Come on, Doc," said Sheriff Aperture. "Let's get down to business. It's goin' on three."

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I turned to Gordy. "Are you expecting a delivery around three o'clock, Gordy?"

"I sure am, Doc. How'd you know?"

At that moment a truck rolled up to the station, and the driver unloaded a big box in front of the office. The sheriff looked at it apprehensively.

"This what you're expecting, Doc?" he said.

"I think so, Sheriff."

The driver of the truck, having got Gordy to sign for the delivery, was about to leave.

"Stay right there!" said the sheriff. "Nobody goes no place till I get to the bottom of this."

"You can let him go, Sheriff," I said. "This man has nothing to do with any crime."

"But he just delivered a bomb or something, didn't he? A bomb that's supposed to blow Northsouth right off the face of the earth!"

"No bomb's that powerful," I said. This was 1928, remember. "And the threat you got on the phone didn't say Northsouth was going to disappear from the face of the earth. It just said it would disappear from the map. Right?"

"What's the difference?" growled Sheriff Aperture.

"Gordy, open the box," I said. But the station manager was shaking like a leaf. He knew what should be in the box, but the talk of a bomb had spooked him.

Then Dave from the radio station said, "Do you think you could open it up inside the office?"

"Why?" I asked.

"So I can broadcast it. This is the biggest news event to hit Northsouth in a long time, and my listeners have a right to hear it firsthand."

"I told you I didn't want to become a character in radio plays–"

"But this isn't a play, Doc. This is the news. And I'm sure with the election coming up, the sheriff wouldn't want to keep the news from the public. Would you, Sheriff?"

"Okay," Sheriff Aperture growled, "let's move this box inside the office, fellas." He seemed to have forgotten all about his bomb when the subject turned to votes.

The sheriff and I stood in front of the microphone. Dave had us shoot some unmeaningful breeze for a while, said he had to get a "level" on us before we could finally broadcast. At one point he said, "Sheriff Aperture, do you think you could step back a bit from the

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microphone? You're overpowering Dr. Sid."

Finally, a few minutes after the three o'clock deadline, we were ready to go on the air. I ripped open the box.

"As you can see," I said, "this is a delivery from the Disassociated Oil Company to all of its affiliated stations. It contains the new 1929 road maps of the New England area. Now, if you'll unfold this map, Sheriff, you will see that the town of Northsouth does not appear in its proper place. Before the map went to the printer, someone got to the proofs and removed Northsouth. Thus, as threatened, Northsouth has vanished from the map!"

I gave it all the drama I could, but most of my listeners looked disappointed. It struck me as a bit ungrateful. After all, I don't set the problems. I just solve 'em.

"I called up the head office of the Disassociated Oil Company this afternoon, and they verified that before his dismissal Tex Flackman had the opportunity to get at the proofs and change them, thus having the revenge on our town he wanted. If all these maps got out, Northsouth would be ruined commercially. Nobody would know we were here. Motorists would just pass through the town without noticing because it didn't appear on their maps."

Flackman, who had been standing in the doorway taking this all in, now cackled with laughter and started to run for his car. Sheriff Aperture went after him. He had little chance of catching him, but it didn't matter. On my request the oil company had held up all the other maps, making a delivery of the doctored ones only to this one station in Northsouth. The deception could easily be remedied.

When we discussed the matter a little later, though, the sheriff said something that surprised me. "You know, Doc, we've had a heap of problems here, and most of 'em have been caused by out-of-towners–gypsies and drifters and suchlike. I wonder if Northsouth wouldn't be better off if nobody could find us."

And most of the townsfolk seemed to agree with him. So to this day you won't find Northsouth on any map. It vanished from the map that August day in 1928 and never came back. I don't want you to think, sonny, that the fact you can't find Northsouth on the map means I make up all these yarns. That would be a big mistake.

Well, that's the story. Now, before you go, sonny, won't you have another little–ah–Sonny? Come on now, sonny, wake up. Plumb unconscious. These young folks just can't seem to hold their libations.

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a *NEW* Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Dr. Sam Hawthorne, the retired New England medico, lived and practiced in a land of miracles—that is, "miracle problems." The rate of "impossible crimes" per capita in Northmont must have been the highest in the country circa 1928 (higher even than that of Wrightsville). But which lover of "locked rooms" would dream of complaining? The more "murders as if by magic" the better (in fiction form, of course), and let Northmont go into the Guinness Book of World Records as the locked-room capital of the world . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE GENERAL STORE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"Well, it's good to see you again," Dr. Sam Hawthorne said, supporting himself with his cane as he reached for the sherry bottle. "Would you like some of this, or maybe something a wee bit stronger? Let's see, I promised to tell you about the murder at our general store this time, didn't I? That was in the summer of 1928. The summer had started warmer than usual, with temperatures well into the eighties during June. The biggest news that month was Amelia Earhart's flying the Atlantic. She was the first woman to do it, and my nurse April took a special pleasure in that fact–"

"See, Dr. Sam!" April said, holding up the morning newspaper with the Earhart story. "I told you women can do anything that men can!"

"She wasn't alone like Lindbergh," I pointed out.

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April merely shook her head. "You men! I think Madge Murphy is right about you!"

"Madge Murphy again! That's all I've been hearing lately."

Madge Murphy was a woman of around 40 who'd settled in Northmont late the previous year. In younger days she'd campaigned for passage of the women's suffrage amendment. Now she was annoying the menfolk of our town with talk of women taking jobs and earning money just like men. It was a pretty radical idea for 1928.

Madge generally held forth at one of Northmont's two general stores–the big one opposite the town square owned by Max Harkner. It was a popular place for young and old, with its great wheels of cheese, barrels of flour, and jars of taffy kisses. Not as cozy as the old days, since he'd knocked out the wall and expanded into John Clane's hardware store, but still it was as close as we came to a town meetin' place. There was even a cracker barrel near the pot-bellied stove, though Max had taken away the chairs since Madge Murphy started hanging around. Not that it discouraged her, though.

Madge was a handsome woman at an age when many of the farm wives, having given birth to a half-dozen children and toiled long hours in the kitchen and vegetable garden, were showing their years and then some. Maybe it was her attraction to men that kept them from running her out of town when she got started with her speeches. Maybe they secretly admired her, for all of their sputtering and sarcasm.

The little real-estate office Madge had opened was right next door to Max's general store, on the opposite side from where he'd expanded. Some thought he should go the other way as well, and buy her out, but Max just couldn't afford that. And in truth I think he was sort of fond of her, for all her carryings-on. There are some men who spend their lives searching for a woman to dominate them, and Max Harkner was that sort. His wife Amelia filled the bill pretty well, but she lacked the physical attractiveness of Madge Murphy.

As it happened, a few hours after my exchange with April I stopped in the general store to purchase some washers for a faucet in my apartment. Madge was there, holding forth by the cracker barrel. The absence of the usual chairs didn't seem to bother her in the least. "What do you think about women in politics?" she was asking old John Clane. Since he sold his hardware store to Max for expansion he'd taken to hanging around the general store. Retirement was not going easily for him, and he looked tired.

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"In politics?" he repeated, rubbing at his bristly gray mustache. "You mean like women mayors and governors?"

"That's right," she said. "And senators and presidents too! Now that we've got the vote it's the next logical step."

"Don't know about that," he grumbled, turning away. He didn't have much use for Madge Murphy. "What do you think, Max?"

Max Harkner was busy arranging a new display of shotguns on the rack behind the counter. He took time out to reply, "Don't make no matter to me what they do. Long as they cook my meals an' raise my children, women can run for anything they like."

Madge leaned back against the side of the big cracker barrel. "None of us might live to see it, but the day is coming when some men will do the cooking and raise the kids while the women go out to work."

This statement brought healthy guffaws from the assembled males, and she turned to me for support. "What do you say, Sam?"

"I don't meddle in those things," I told her. "Max, when you get a chance could you find me some washers this size?"

He came away from the shotguns and peered through his thick glasses at the object in my hand. "Got those around here somewheres," he said, and went in search of them, pausing to turn on the exhaust fan to clear away some of the cigar smoke.

"You should have," Clane spoke up. "You bought up my stock when you tore down the wall."

After several minutes of searching Max found the washers and I paid him. Madge fell into step beside me as I left the store. "You didn't have much to say on my side, Sam."

"Look, Madge, you've won April over. Don't you think that's enough?"

"I'll win that Max over too."

"You already have. But with a wife like Amelia I guess he's afraid to do anything about it."

She chuckled. "Can you imagine anyone being married to Amelia Harkner?"

I knew what she meant. Amelia was something of a shrew. "Some people probably couldn't imagine anyone being married to Madge Murphy," I said in jest.

"One man could." She was suddenly serious. "I was married once, Sam. Back in New York, during the war. He was killed in France three weeks before the armistice."

"I'm sorry."

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"You needn't be. Better men than he were killed in the war."

"You've never remarried?"

She shrugged. "There was always so much to do, getting the vote for women, and now trying to get them decent jobs."

"You can't do much stuck out here in Northmont."

"It's only temporary. If I can build my real-estate business into something profitable I'd like to move to Boston."

We'd reached my office and I said goodbye. It was the longest conversation I'd ever had with Madge Murphy and it had been a pleasant one.

I hadn't thought old John Clane was looking all that well at the general store and I was right. He died of a heart attack at ten o'clock that night. His wife Milly phoned me and I hurried over, but there was nothing I could do.

"He's gone, Milly," I said.

She was a pleasant woman in her early sixties, younger than John, and his death had unnerved her. "He seemed all right after dinner, Dr. Sam. He went out for a walk and he stopped at Phil Sage's house. He came back just a while ago. I could see that he was flushed. He sat in that chair, complaining of a pain in his chest, and then he just died there." Her voice broke at the end and I tried to comfort her.

"Can I call the children for you, Milly?"

She stood up, shaking off the tears. "No, that's for me to do." She went to the telephone and then paused, as if remembering. "We had a good life together, but he was never happy a single day since his retirement. Working was everything to him, Dr. Sam."

I looked down at the figure in the chair. I'd never known John Clane well. He was only someone to tend my needs when I visited his hardware store. I wished now I'd had time for a conversation with him, like the one I'd had earlier with Madge Murphy. "You call the children, Milly. I'll wait with you till they get here."

It was close to midnight when I got back to my apartment, and I found a strange greeting awaiting me. A tall man stepped from the shadows as I fitted my key into the door and said, "Don't be frightened, Dr. Sam. It's only me–Frank Bench."

"Oh–Frank! You did startle me."

"I've been waiting here for close to two hours." Frank was a slim boyish man in his early forties who'd held a number of odd jobs around town. Most recently he'd been working for Max at the gen-

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eral store, but I knew something had caused him to leave a couple of weeks earlier. I hadn't even realized he was still around town.

"Didn't I hear you'd moved away, Frank?"

"I did, but just over to Shinn Corners. I gotta talk to you, Doc."

I sighed. There'd be no sleep for a while tonight. "Come on in. I've been over to the Clane house. Old John died of a heart attack tonight."

"He did? Terribly sorry to hear that. I always liked him." He followed me inside and sat down. I noticed for the first time that his hands were trembling.

"Can I get you a drink or something, Frank?"

"No–no, thanks, Doc. I just wanted to talk. You probably heard that I lost my job at the store."

"I noticed you weren't around. But I didn't hear anything else."

"Max fired me. He was jealous of my attentions to his wife."

"Amelia?" The very thought of it floored me. "But surely there was nothing between you?"

"There was something, Doc, and that's why I had to see you. Amelia's forty-four years old. Gettin' pregnant at her age could be dangerous–"

"Pregnant?"

He hung his head. "I was afraid she might be. I couldn't stay away without knowing. You bein' her doctor, I figured you'd know as soon as anyone."

The news had stunned me so that I was speechless for a moment. When I recovered I said, "As far as I know Amelia's not pregnant, Frank. But you give me your address in Shinn Corners. If anything like that happens, I'll know where to reach you."

He hesitated. "You won't tell Max, will you? God, he'd come after me with a shotgun!"

"I won't tell Max. I won't tell anyone."

"Thanks, Doc. Maybe I'll take that drink now."

I poured him a stiff shot of Scotch and had one myself. The idea of Frank Bench and Amelia Harkner was still more than I could fathom. But I never was much good at understanding affairs of the heart.

Frank gave me his address and I watched him walk out to where his old jalopy was parked across the street. It was after midnight, but at last I was going to get some sleep.

Then the telephone rang. As I went to answer it my mind was running through the possibilities–a summer fever, an early delivery

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for Mrs. Johnson, an automobile accident–

"Dr. Hawthorne here."

"Sam, this is Sheriff Lens. Can you come down to the Harkner general store right away?"

"What's up, Sheriff?"

"Max has been murdered. An' it looks like that gal Madge Murphy done it."

The place was ablaze with lights when I arrived. Sheriff Lens was inside and one of his new deputies was guarding the door, keeping out the small handful of curious townspeople who'd been attracted by all this post-midnight activity. I walked in and stopped dead. Max Harkner was sprawled on his back, the center of his chest bloody and tattered.

"What hit him?" I asked Sheriff Lens.

"Shotgun blast. From about six feet away, I'd judge, by the size of the pattern."

The shotgun itself lay on the floor nearby. It was a big double-barreled one from the rack behind the counter and I could see the price tag still on its trigger guard. Next my eyes went to a chair where Madge Murphy sat holding the side of her head.

"You're hurt," I said, going to her.

"I fell and hit my head."

I took her hand away and saw some matted blood in her hairline. After washing it off I could see that the wound was not serious, but there was a bruised area around it. "You must have one heck of a headache."

She tried to smile. "It doesn't feel too good. I was unconscious for a couple of hours."

"You should be x-rayed at the hospital for a possible concussion. Are there any feelings of nausea or drowsiness?"

"I–I don't think so."

I glanced over at Max's body. Sheriff Lens had finally had the decency to cover it with a couple of burlap sacks. "Suppose you tell me what happened here," I asked Madge.

"That's just the trouble–I don't know! I was working late–till around nine thirty–and as I closed my office I saw that Max was just closing up too. You know he's open late on these summer evenings. I came in to buy some cigarettes and I tripped over something–that sack of potatoes, I think. My head hit the cracker barrel and that's the last thing I knew."

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"Who was here with you?"

"No one–just Max and me. That's why he was closing–because there were no customers."

I glanced at Sheriff Lens. "All right, what happened when you came to?" I asked her.

"It was much later, nearly midnight by the clock. Max was lying there just like that with the shotgun next to him. I thought he'd killed himself."

"Any chance of that?" I asked Lens.

"No chance. Even if he'd fired the shotgun with his toe–which he didn't–the barrel couldn't have been six feet away from his chest. It was murder, no doubt about it."

"Then someone entered the store while you were unconscious, took the shotgun from the rack, loaded it, and killed him."

"That's what I told the sheriff, but he doesn't believe me."

"I don't believe her for a good an' simple reason, Doc. If that's what happened, where'd the killer go? When we got here, every door an' window in the place was locked an' bolted–from the inside!"

I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised by that news. It seemed just about every crime Northmont had in those days involved an impossibility of one sort or another. "So that's why you phoned me," I said. "It's another locked-room murder."

Sheriff Lens shook his head in disgust. "Ain't no such thing, Doc, and don't you try to make it one! I called you 'cause the lady was bleedin' from that head cut. There's no locked room because the killer was right here when we arrived."

Madge nodded sadly. "Max bolted the front door after he let me in for my cigarettes. When I came to and found him dead I phoned the sheriff. I was still dazed, so I just sat and waited. It never occurred to me that the door was still bolted from the inside. If I'd killed him do you think I'd be dumb enough to leave it like that?"

I went over to examine the door. It had a key lock with a separate bolt above it, for when Max was working around inside after hours. I checked the storeroom and the back door beyond it. This had a wooden bar bolt that went across the entire width of the door, and it was locked besides. No one had left that way. I glanced at the two storeroom windows but they were both locked and barred on the inside. The only windows out front were the big display ones on either side of the front door. There was the small exhaust fan halfway up the side wall, but I could see the blades were too close for

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a double-barreled shotgun to pass through between them, to say nothing of a flesh-and-blood murderer. I glanced up at the high wooden ceiling, painted black, but there was no skylight or opening.

"How about the cellar?" I suggested.

"We checked it first thing. Nobody down there. The coal chute is bolted shut from the inside. We checked everytning and even looked inside the furnace. There's nobody here. Nobody except Miss Murphy and the dead man."

"There must be a dozen other hiding places in a place this big."

"Yeah? Find one," he challenged me.

I decided to change the subject. "May I examine the shotgun?"

"Sure. We took a couple of prints off it but near as I can tell with my magnifying glass they belong to Max."

I nodded. "He just put these guns on the rack today. I saw him handling them." I broke open the shotgun and saw that both barrels were loaded but only one had been fired. "Where's Amelia? Have you notified her?"

"Can't find her," he answered.

"What?"

"Can't find her. She's not at home."

"Isn't that odd?"

"Maybe, maybe not. She could be away visiting."

I admitted I hadn't seen her in a few days. "But I think we'd have heard if she was away."

"Oh, she'll turn up. Meantime, my business is with the living. Come along, Miss Murphy."

"Where are you taking her?"

Sheriff Lens stared me down. "Over to the hospital for that x-ray you suggested. Then I'm booking her for murder."

I was in the office early the following morning, but not early enough to beat April there. "Dr. Sam, did you hear what happened to Madge Murphy?"

"I heard. I was there, April."

"I know it's terrible about Max Harkner being killed, but they can't really believe she did it. This is some sort of a trick to frame her."

"April, I doubt if anyone would kill Max just to frame Madge Murphy for the crime. Murder needs a better motive than that."

"Then what do they say was Madge's motive?"

"That's a good question." And it was one I decided to pursue.

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I walked over to the jail and stopped at the sheriff's office. I had a dozen questions for him, starting with Madge's head injury, but I was forestalled by the presence of Max's widow, Amelia. She sat straight as a ramrod on the chair opposite the sheriff's desk, her thin face tearless but unsmiling. Trying to picture her with Frank Bench was still more than my imagination could handle.

"Hello, Amelia," I said. "Terrible thing about Max. I'm sorry."

She nodded stiffly. "I've known all along that Murphy woman was no good."

"She hasn't been convicted yet," I pointed out. "Nor even indicted."

"But there's no one else who could have killed him!"

Sheriff Lens cleared his throat. "It certainly seems not, Mrs. Harkner. But we're investigatin' all angles."

I glanced at him. "Mind if I ask Amelia a question, Sheriff?"

"Go ahead."

"Amelia, where were you last night at the time of the killing?"

"I don't rightly know what time the killing was."

I looked at Sheriff Lens again but all I got was a shrug. "No one's come forward who heard the shot, Doc. The coroner figures he died somewhere between nine thirty and eleven thirty, but that's a pretty long time."

"Look at it this way," I suggested. "Madge came in around nine thirty, tripped, and hit her head. Max must have been shot soon afterward or he'd have done something to revive her."

"That's if you believe her story, Doc. I don't. This business of trippin' over a potato sack just don't hold water."

"Anyway, Amelia, where were you? The sheriff tried to reach you shortly after midnight."

"I was right at home. When Max didn't come I went to bed. I can sleep through anything when I first go to sleep, and I never heard the phone. He called back around three and finally roused me."

"Any idea why Madge Murphy would want to kill your husband?"

"He probably disagreed with her crazy ideas. That would be enough for a woman like her."

I turned back to Lens. "Sheriff, how is Madge's head? Did the x-rays show a concussion?"

"They couldn't tell for sure. She's supposed to take it easy for a few days. That won't be hard, in a cell upstairs."

"May I see her?"

"I don't know, Doc." He glanced at Amelia Harkner. "Can't give her any special treatment, you know."

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"She should be examined by a doctor. That's not special treatment."

"Oh, all right. Here, I'll get my keys and take you up there."

As I followed him up the narrow stairs to the upper cell block, I asked, "What do you think of Amelia Harkner?"

"God, that woman's cold as a fish. She hasn't showed a bit of emotion about poor Max."

"Maybe she had a gentleman friend on the side," I suggested.

"Her? You kiddin' me, Doc?"

"Stranger things have happened."

Madge Murphy was sitting in her cell writing a letter. "It's to my mother," she said. "I wanted her to hear it from me, to know that I'm all right."

"Where is your mother?"

"Home. Pittsburgh, or at least a little farm just outside of Pittsburgh. That's where I came from. I haven't been back there in years."

I sat down on her bunk as Sheriff Lens locked the cell door behind me. "You got ten minutes, Doc," he called out as he went back downstairs.

"You're in big trouble, Madge," I told her.

"I know."

"Every door and window in that place was locked from the inside. Max might have unlocked a door to admit his killer, but then how did the killer escape?"

"I wish I could tell you, Sam, but I can't. It's as much a mystery to me as to everyone else."

"Suppose you start by telling me the truth about what happened to you."

"What?"

"I don't see how you could have tripped and hit your head on that cracker barrel in exactly the way you described. If you had, the wound would have been on the left side of your head instead of the right."

She looked away, staring at the wall for a moment. Then she turned back to me. "It was like I said, except that I went over backwards. That's why I hit my left side instead of my right."

"You were backing up when you fell?"

"Yes."

Then suddenly I knew what had happened. "You were backing away from Max. He was coming at you."

She nodded, head down. "He was coming right at me. I don't know

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what got into him, what he intended to do. He reached out and grabbed at me. I jumped back out of reach and my foot got caught on the potato sack. I hit my head just like I said, and that's the last thing I know."

I sat and thought about it. Then, very quietly, I said, "Madge, if he was trying to attack you and you shot him, that's a defense any jury could understand."

"I didn't shoot him!"

"All right. Calm down. I believe you, Madge."

"You don't sound as if you do!"

"I'm sorry. Look, do you remember anything at all during the time you were unconscious? Any sound, any voices?"

"No. Nothing."

"Had Max ever made advances before?"

"Not serious ones. He'd say things sometimes, just kidding around. I suppose when I came there last night he thought I wanted more than kidding."

"Did you ever hear any talk about Max's wife and another man?"

"Amelia? You must be joking!"

"Maybe." I got to my feet. "I think I hear the sheriff. My time must be up."

"Can you help me, Sam?"

"I'll try, Madge."

But I went out of there without any idea as to how.

Northmont's only funeral parlor was busy that afternoon as both Max Harkner and John Clane were being prepared for showing. Will Watson, the undertaker, had always been philosophical about death. "Funny thing," he said to me, "these two men had stores next to each other for all these years, and now they both die on the same night."

"A coincidence," I told him. "Unless you think there was something funny about Clane's death."

"No, no–it was a heart attack just like you said on the death certificate, Doc. A good way to go, I suppose, if you have to go at all."

"I suppose." I was remembering the time I'd spent at the Clane house, at the very time of Max's murder, while Frank Bench claimed to have been waiting for me at my apartment. There was no one's word but his that he'd been there.

". . . fixed them both up lookin' real natural," Will Watson ram-

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bled on. "That was a terrible chest wound!"

"Shotguns do that," I answered absently. I was still thinking about Bench. Could he have murdered Max so Amelia would be free?

"As for John, except for a little shoulder bruise where he fell, there wasn't a mark on him."

"Is either of the widows here yet?" I asked Watson suddenly.

"Amelia Harkner is upstairs."

I went up to find her sitting alone in the family room. Max hadn't had much in the way of relatives. "Hello again, Amelia."

"Hello, Dr. Hawthorne."

"It used to be Sam."

"I'm not myself today."

"I know, and you must forgive my intruding on your grief with more questions. But I know you're anxious to find Max's killer."

"Max's killer is already in jail."

"Maybe. Tell me, Amelia, have you seen anything of Frank Bench lately?"

"Frank?" She grew a bit pale at my question. "No–why do you ask?"

"He came to me late last night with a crazy story. He asked me if you were pregnant."

She closed her eyes and swayed a bit, and I hurried to steady her. "I'm sorry, Amelia, but I have to know the truth."

"I'm not pregnant," she said, her voice low.

"Did Frank have a motive for killing Max?"

"Frank wouldn't hurt a fly."

"All right," I said. I was getting nowhere with her. "I'll see you later, Amelia."

The outer rooms were already filling with mourners. I recognized Phil Sage, the local gunsmith, and his wife at the door. Some of the other regulars from Max's store were drifting in too. I decided if they were here I should go back to the store itself.

I walked over to the town square and strolled around the building, noting the boxes and barrels piled in the side alley. The door of Madge's real-estate office on the other side carried a simple *Closed* sign. Outside Max's store a deputy stood guard.

I got him to let me in and looked around once more. Nothing had changed. I sat in a chair and stared at the ceiling, waiting for some notion to hit me.

And then I saw something I hadn't noticed before.

I found a stepladder and climbed up for a closer look. The black-

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painted wood of the ceiling seemed splintered in one area, and there were tiny holes like worm holes covering the same area. The rest of the ceiling was untouched. I got out my jackknife and probed in one of the holes.

"What you doin' up there, Doc?" a voice asked from below. I looked down to see Sheriff Lens standing there.

"Checking the ceiling for worm holes," I said.

"Deputy called to tell me he let you in."

"That was very efficient of him."

I climbed down the ladder and faced him. He was looking just a bit smug as he said, "Thought you'd want to know I solved the case."

"You said you solved it last night when you arrested Madge Murphy."

He dismissed that with a wave of his hand. "No, the Murphy woman didn't kill Max. I know who did do it, though, and for once I've solved a locked-room mystery ahead of you, Doc!"

"Let's hear it, Sheriff."

"I've got a neighbor of the Harkners who saw Amelia leave the house alone before midnight. She wasn't sleepin' at all when I phoned. She wasn't there."

"Where was she?"

"Hiding. Hiding right here in this store after killin' her husband."

"But you said you searched the place," I protested.

"Didn't look in one hidin' place. It was so obvious, right here in front of us, that I never thought of it."

"Where's that?"

He pointed it out dramatically. "Right there, Doc, in the cracker barrel! Amelia Harkner killed her husband an' hid in the cracker barrel."

"A clever idea, Sheriff. But you're trying to tell me that Amelia killed Max, climbed into that barrel, somehow buried herself in crackers, and remained absolutely motionless for several hours. You and your deputies were here, I was here. The slightest rustle of those crackers would have attracted our attention. And how could she have left the store afterward, with a deputy guarding the door? She'd never risk something like that when she could simply leave the scene before Madge came to and found the body. After all, Madge would still have been a likely suspect even if the store wasn't locked."

Sheriff Lens was downcast. "Then the thing's impossible, Doc."

"Maybe not," I said. "Come on, let's go for a walk."

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I led him down one of the side streets, away from the center of town. We'd walked about ten minutes when I paused before a house and glanced in both directions. "I'm going to look around here, maybe enter that garage without permission. You'd best look the other way, Sheriff."

"But what–?"

"No questions now."

Once in a while you get lucky. I found what I was looking for almost at once, hidden among the rakes and garden tools at the back of the garage. I took it out and showed it to Lens. "What does it mean?" he asked.

"I'll explain later. Right now we're going to the funeral parlor."

It was crowded now, and Sheriff Lens, preceding me, headed for the room where Max Harkner's body was on view. "Not there," I said. "The other room."

Milly Clane rose to greet us, and Lens muttered a few words of sympathy. "So good of you both to come," she said.

"Milly, there's something I have to tell you," I said. "Could we talk in private?"

She glanced from Lens to me. "Certainly. There's a room for the family."

When we were away from the mourners I came right to the point. "Milly, we've just come from your house. I found the shotgun in your garage."

"What?"

"The gun that killed Max Harkner, Milly."

"Are you accusing me of killing him?"

"No, but I'm accusing your husband. It was John who killed Max, and the excitement of it brought on his heart attack."

Sheriff Lens was taken by surprise. "Doc, are you telling me a dead man killed Max?"

"He wasn't dead when he pulled that trigger, Sheriff. He was very much alive. You told me, Milly, that he went out for a walk after dinner, that he was going to stop at Phil Sage's house–Phil Sage, the gunsmith. He picked up a shotgun there, didn't he? Maybe one that Sage was repairing for him, and he bought some shells too. I don't think he intended to use it on Max–not then, at least. But he was passing the store and he saw Max, the man who'd bought him out and put him into retirement, the man who had trouble finding something as simple as washers in his big new store. Moreover, he

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saw Max in the act of attacking a woman, Madge Murphy. He must have tried to go to her aid, more out of a hatred for Max than any love of Madge."

"But what about the shotgun we found inside the store?" Sheriff Lens wanted to know.

"John Clane probably shouted at Max through that locked front door. Max saw Clane with a shotgun and loaded one of his own in self-defense. He wouldn't open the door, but that didn't stop Clane. He remembered the exhaust fan and went around to the side alley. He stood on one of the boxes there, stuck the barrel of his shotgun between the blades of the fan, and fired at Max, hitting him in the chest. Max's finger pulled his trigger in a reflex action, and his load of buckshot hit the wooden ceiling. I found the pellets embedded there this afternoon. One trouble with shotguns is there's no way of checking pellets for identifying marks. We saw the gun near the body, noticed it had been fired, and assumed it was the murder weapon. That meant the killer had to have been inside the store, but in truth he never was."

"Wait a minute now, Doc," the sheriff protested. "I saw you examine that exhaust fan myself, an' the barrel of the shotgun wouldn't fit between those blades."

"A double-barreled shotgun is so called to distinguish it from the single-barreled variety. Max's double-barrel wouldn't fit, but John Clane's single-barrel did."

Through all of this Milly Clane had remained silent. Now she spoke. "You've built up a theoretical case against John, but where's your proof?"

"The shotgun I found in your garage, Milly. Once I dug that buckshot out of the store's ceiling I knew there had to be a second gun. Your house is only a ten-minute walk from Max's store, so John could easily have reached home by ten o'clock when he suffered his fatal heart attack, but there wouldn't have been time for him to get rid of the shotgun. I thought we'd find it at your place."

"I need more than that to accept him as a murderer."

"I'm sorry, Milly. I'm just as sorry as I can be. But if you want more, I can give you more. When I was here earlier today, Will Watson mentioned something about a bruised shoulder being the only mark on John's body. We all know you can get a slightly bruised shoulder from the recoil of a shotgun. The undertaker thought the bruise was from John's falling, but you told me he died sitting in his chair."

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She only nodded. And turned away.

"I'm convinced," Sheriff Lens said. "The case is closed. But tell me one thing more–if Amelia wasn't at the store killing her husband, where in hell was she?"

"I imagine she was meeting her lover," I said. "Frank Bench left my house shortly after midnight. She must have been waiting somewhere for him, not knowing he'd gone to see me."

"So that was the end of it," Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded. "But surely you've time for another–ah–small libation before you depart. No? Well, come by next time and I'll have another story for you–about what happened the time I was called to jury duty at the old courthouse."

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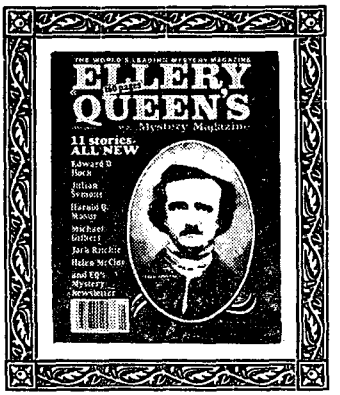

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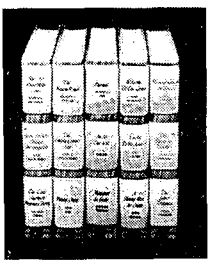

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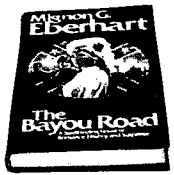

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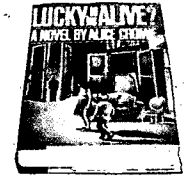

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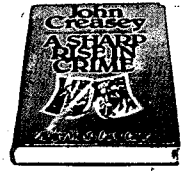

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